

Daniel R. Streett  
They went out from us

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Daniel R. Streett

# They went out from us

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in First John

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τῇ γυναικί μου συγκληρονόμῳ χάριτος ζωῆς.  
γνήσια σύζυγός μοι εἶ σύ.



## Foreword

The present work is a revised version of my 2008 dissertation. I wish to thank the following people for the part each has played in bringing this work to its present publication: my adviser, Andreas Köstenberger, who modeled the discipline and attention to detail essential to good academic writing, and supported my research even when he may not have been totally convinced; my second examiner, L. Scott Kellum, who offered many helpful suggestions and critiques; Judy Gundry, who has been a constant source of sage professional advice and encouragement, and who recommended that I pursue publication with DeGruyter; Albrecht Döhnert of DeGruyter, who accepted my thesis for publication in the BZNW series; the anonymous readers for the BZNW series, who provided many helpful comments; Jerry Johnson, who hired me in 2005 to teach at Criswell College and graciously arranged a lighter initial teaching load to allow me to complete much of the research for this work; my brother, Andrew Streett, who served as a sounding board for many of the ideas presented below; my parents, Alan and Lynn Streett, who instilled in me from a young age a love of reading and research, and who proofread the entire work; and finally, to my wife, Renée, who lovingly and patiently endured two years of research and writing at the beginning of our marriage, who carefully proofread the entire work and compiled most of the indices, and to whom I joyfully dedicate this book.

Daniel R. Streett  
September 10, 2010





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## Introduction

Perhaps the most basic question that any exegete must address when interpreting 1 John concerns the historical situation of the letter.<sup>1</sup> In 1 John 2:18–27 the author<sup>2</sup> mentions certain figures, whom he calls “antichrists” and “liars,” who have apparently left the community and denied some of its basic beliefs. Later, in 1 John 4:1–6 (and similarly, in 2 John 7–11), the author warns his audience about “false prophets” who do not confess “that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” Other passages in the letter may also hint at the presence of opponents<sup>3</sup> (e.g., 1 John 5:6). Many scholars have mined both the Epistle and later patristic evidence for clues to the identity of the opponents. According to the majority view, 1 John’s polemic is aimed at former members of the Johannine community who have seceded because of their doctrinal innovation, which is usually thought to have taken a docetizing or gnosticizing trajectory.

- 
- 1 While it is almost universally acknowledged that 1 John lacks some of the key elements of a conventional letter or epistle, and is therefore perhaps better understood as a “treatise,” “tractate,” or “church order,” I will refer to it by its canonical designation as a letter or epistle, without thereby implying any judgment as to its genre. For discussion of the genre of 1 John, see J. V. Hills, “A Genre for 1 John,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. B. A. Pearson and A. T. Kraabel; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 367–77; Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1982), 86–92; Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John* (Hermeneia; trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 3; John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John* (SP 18; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2002), 37–48.
  - 2 Throughout this work, I will refer to the “author” of 1 John or the Fourth Gospel, rather than to “John” or the “Gospel of John.” There are two reasons for this approach. First, it is an attempt to acknowledge the technically anonymous nature of both the Gospel and the Epistles. Second, it is an attempt to avoid the confusion that can result when “John” is used to refer to the Fourth Gospel itself, to the presumed author of that Gospel and the Epistles, and to John the Baptist.
  - 3 Designations for the “opponents” of 1 John abound. They have been called “dissidents,” “secessionists,” “false teachers,” “heretics,” and “apostates.” In this work I will use the general term “opponents,” but will at certain points distinguish between opponents who once belonged to the community but later departed—i.e., secessionists or apostates—and a more undefined group of antagonists whom the author believes may be troubling the community.

In what follows I propose an alternative explanation of the opponents and the historical situation of 1 John. I argue that 1 John addresses an essentially Jewish situation not substantially different from that typically proposed for the Fourth Gospel.<sup>4</sup> The primary boundary marker of the community remains the confession of Jesus as the Messiah (John 20:31; 1 John 2:22; 5:1). Those members of the community who seceded did so not because of their doctrinal innovation, but rather because they reneged upon their initial confession of Jesus as the Messiah, probably in order to return to the relative security of the Jewish synagogue.

In order to unpack this argument, I proceed as follows: In Chapter 1, I survey the major approaches to identifying the opponents, summarize the exegetical basis for each approach, and note the historical parallels to the opponents adduced by each approach. I also point out the various problems with each approach that render them inadequate explanations of the textual and historical evidence. I conclude by proposing that the opponents are best identified as Jewish apostates who have returned to the synagogue after a brief sojourn in the Johannine community.

In Chapter 2, I summarize and critique the dominant methodology used to reconstruct the opponents and the historical situation: mirror-reading. I note how a subjective and unregulated maximalist mirror-reading misrepresents the purpose of 1 John and leads the interpreter to detect polemic where none is intended. As an alternative to a maximalist mirror-reading, I propose that the purpose of 1 John is primarily pastoral. The author is “preaching to the converted,” as it were, and urging them to remain faithful. The polemical material which does exist in the letter is limited to 2:18–27 and 4:1–6 and is subservient to the overarching pastoral aim.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 discuss the four passages that play a major role in almost every scholarly reconstruction of the opponents. Each chapter will follow the same basic pattern: first, a summary of the way that the major views have interpreted the passage; next, the problems with each interpretation; finally, an exegesis of the passage and an argument for an alternative explanation.

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4 My argument does not primarily deal with the Fourth Gospel, nor does it require that the Fourth Gospel be set in a specific historical context where conflict with the synagogue is a pressing concern. Though this reconstruction is, in its general contours, agreeable to me, my arguments do not depend on it. My main point is that there is little or nothing that leads us to posit different settings for the Gospel and the Epistles.

Chapter 3 addresses 1 John 2:18–27, which is the first passage to mention the opponents explicitly. It designates them as “antichrists” who have departed the community. I demonstrate that this passage identifies the key issue behind the secession as the messiahship of Jesus. Those who departed, the author states, have rejected the basic confession of the community: that Jesus is the Messiah.

Chapter 4 addresses 1 John 4:1–6, which describes “false prophets” who do not confess that “Jesus Christ has come in flesh.” These false prophets are often identified with the secessionists of 1 John 2. This passage is then taken to be an expanded description that clarifies the true crux of the schism: the flesh of Jesus Christ. Against the view that the opponents advocate a docetizing Christological heresy, I argue that the confession in 1 John 4:1–6 is in fact just another form of the original, foundational confession of the community. That is, there is no special anti-docetic thrust to the confession. The main point is the same: Jesus is the Messiah. In order to demonstrate this, I analyze the grammar of the confession and adduce evidence from other primitive Christian confessions that employ incarnational language.

In Chapter 5, I address 1 John 5:6–12, which is often thought to directly quote a key component of the opponents’ teaching: that Christ “came in water only.” While a majority identifies this as an expression of docetic or Cerinthian Christology—or, perhaps, a devaluation of Jesus’ atoning death in favor of a focus on his baptism—I argue that the author is actually employing a rhetorical technique (*amplificatio* or escalation), with a special Jewish twist. Therefore, he is not refuting opponents with this statement, but is rather assuring his audience that God has provided not one, but two or three witnesses, to confirm that Jesus is the messianic Son, the bearer of eternal life. The first two witnesses, the blood and water, are two past events, Jesus’ baptism and death, which testify to his messianic identity as the one anointed by the Spirit to sacrificially take away the world’s sins. The third witness, the Spirit, continually reminds the believing community of these past events and, by its very presence in the community, testifies to their efficacy in producing fellowship with God and eternal life.

In Chapter 6, I address a final passage, 2 John 7–11, which primarily reiterates the main points of 1 John concerning the opponents. Two areas, however, are often thought to supplement the portrait of the opponents. First, some believe that the confessional criterion of 2 John 7, with grammar subtly different from that of 1 John 4:2, indicates that 2 John deals with a slightly different theological problem, perhaps one involving a denial of Jesus’ physical second coming. The second issue revolves around 2 John 9, which many believe portrays the opponents

as “progressives” who have pursued gnostic or docetic innovations and therefore rejected the community’s tradition. I argue, however, that the grammatical change in 2 John 7 is not significant, and that the “progressive” interpretation of 2 John 9 lacks a firm lexicographical basis. Second John, like 1 John, addresses the issue, first, of apostates who turn their back on the basic confession of the community, and, second, of visiting Jewish prophets who do not accept Jesus as Messiah, and therefore should not be heeded.

## Chapter 1

# Options for Identifying the Opponents of 1 John

### I. The Basic Questions

Most historical reconstructions of the opponents in 1 John follow three basic steps. First, one must decide which passages in the epistle should be used to reconstruct the opponents. Should the interpreter depend only on those statements that explicitly mention the opponents, or is a more aggressive “mirror-reading” appropriate? Among the passages deemed polemical, which should be considered the most important for describing the opponents? Second, the interpreter must determine what the selected passages actually say about the opponents. What do the various descriptions of the opponents mean? How accurate or trustworthy are they? How literally should they be taken? Third, the interpreter must try to find religio-historical parallels to the opponents and their views that will further clarify their teachings and their position within the early church. Are there other figures, movements, or teachings in early Christianity with which the opponents can be identified, compared, or somehow genetically connected? Do the Johannine opponents appear in other NT texts? Do the church fathers oppose the same group or similar groups? Can we find any evidence of the opponents’ intellectual descendants, or movements or schools of thought spawned by them?

It should not be supposed that these three questions are pursued in a simple linear fashion. Rather, each interpreter adopts a hypothesis, tests it against the text and historical context, and then revises the hypothesis to account better for both elements. Good interpreters, as a rule, also compare the explanatory power of their hypotheses to that of competing hypotheses. The process of reconstructing the historical situation of a text is thus both art and science. It involves both rigorous analysis and imagination. It is not so much linear as it is circular (or spiraling).

The goal of this chapter is to discuss how each of the major reconstructions of the opponents addresses these issues.<sup>1</sup> Which passages do they find relevant in their reconstruction? How do they interpret those passages? How do they relate the opponents to other groups in early Christianity? Along the way, I will note some of the problems confronting each view, especially with regard to the use of historical parallels. The discussion is lengthy by necessity. While it may seem excessive to devote so much space to an overview of the scholarship on this matter, it is essential to uncover the origins and assumptions of the major views. In their finished state, well-presented scholarly reconstructions can be quite compelling at first blush. It is only when we look more closely at each interpretive step, each conjecture, each assumption, that we may begin to suspect the scholar's reconstruction is a true *tour de force*, convincing less because of the evidence presented than the imagination, stature, and charisma of the scholar himself.

## II. Five Views of the Opponents

Most scholarly reconstructions of the secessionists fit into one of five categories:<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 This chapter will not discuss in detail the exegetical arguments of each of these views. That discussion will take place in Chapters 3 through 6.
  - 2 For a helpful discussion of recent debate on the opponents in 1 John see John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John* (SP 18; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2002), 21–26. For an overview of older scholarship on the issue consult Wilhelm M. de Wette, *Lehrbuch der historisch-kritischen Einleitung in die Bibel Alten und Neuen Testaments* (8th ed.; edited by Eberhard Schrader; 2 vols.; Berlin: Reimer, 1869), 2:400–401. In addition to the five categories above, some believe that 1 John addressed more than one group or category of secessionists. Tertullian, *Praescr.* 33, reflects this interpretation when he identifies Marcion as the target of 1 John 4:2 and Ebion as the target of 2:22–23. This used to be a common position among scholars. See, e.g., Augustus Neander, *The First Epistle of John Practically Explained* (translated by H. C. Conant; New York: Colby, 1852), 12, who found polemic against Ebionite, docetic, and Cerinthian errors. James MacKnight, *A New Literal Translation from the Original Greek of All the Apostolical Epistles* (Philadelphia: Wardle, 1841), 648–53, likewise saw all three being opposed, but also posited Nicolaitan opponents to account for the libertinism evident in the claims of chs. 1 and 2. Cf. Alan E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (ICC; New York: Scribners, 1912), xli, who argues that “the Epistle is directed against various forms of teaching,” but thinks that there was one specific false teaching that actually prompted the writing of 1 John. Recently, however, the theory of multiple groups has found few defenders. Among them, Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (rev. ed.; WBC 51; Waco: Word, 2007),



1. The secessionists are *gnostics*, who stress their advanced knowledge, regard matter as evil, and advocate libertinism and/or perfectionism.<sup>3</sup>

2. The secessionists are *docetists*, who hold that Jesus Christ was not truly a flesh-and-blood human being, but only appeared to be so.

3. The secessionists hold to a *separation Christology* (commonly associated with Cerinthus), which distinguishes the human being Jesus from the Christ, a divine spirit-being or power. Separation Christology teaches that the Christ descended upon Jesus at his baptism and departed sometime prior to his death. Thus, Jesus and the Christ are not to be identified.

4. The secessionists *deemphasize or devalue Jesus' historical ministry and atoning death*, while emphasizing the Son's glory and pre-existence, as well as his roles as revealer and dispenser of the Holy Spirit. In many cases, the secessionists display

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xxi–xxii, finds both high, or docetic, and low, or Jewish, Christological errors opposed, as does Georg Richter, “Blut und Wasser aus der durchbohrten Seite Jesu (Joh 19,34b),” in *Studien zum Johannesevangelium* (ed. J. Hainz; BU 13; Regensburg: Pustet, 1977), 126, who holds that 2:22 and 5:1, 5 merely repeat the polemic of the Fourth Gospel, while 4:1–3 and 5:5–6 oppose the new docetic teachers. Cf. Paul N. Anderson, “The Sitz im Leben of the Johannine Bread of Life Discourse and Its Evolving Context,” in *Critical Readings of John 6* (edited by R. Alan Culpepper; BibInt 22; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 46–47, who thinks that ch. 2 addresses a Jewish denial of Jesus as the Messiah, while ch. 4 attacks a docetic denial of Jesus' humanity; similarly, see Seán Freyne, “Christological Debates among Johannine Christians,” *Concilium* (2002): 59–67; W. F. A. Besser, *Die Briefe St. Johannis in Bibelstunden für die Gemeinde ausgelegt* (Halle: Mühlmann, 1893), 144–46. The position has fallen out of favor because a) in the two most important opponent passages (2:18–27; 4:1–6) similar language is used to describe the opponents (“antichrists,” “going out”), b) most exegetes detect a conceptual unity to the views of the opponents as they find them represented in the various polemical passages, and c) there is no single passage in 1 John that speaks of two distinct groups. Ockham's Razor, in this case, means that there is no need unnecessarily to multiply opponents. See the discussion in Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1982), 49–50, 490; John Painter, “The ‘Opponents’ in 1 John,” *NTS* 32 (1986), 50; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary* (trans. R. Fuller, I. Fuller; New York: Crossroad, 1992), 17; Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 35–36; H. Thyen, “Johannesbriefe,” *TRE*, 17:193.

- 3 Many of the other views also attribute libertine or antinomian ethical teaching to the opponents. Almost without exception, scholars who believe that 1 John combats ethical errors hold that the opponents' ethics flow from an aberrant Christology.

enthusiastic or pneumatic tendencies that amplify these differences.

5. The secessionists are *apostate Jews* or *Judaizers* (i.e., Judaizing Gentiles)<sup>4</sup> who advocate either a lower (perhaps Ebionite) Christology, or who have forsaken their confession of Jesus as the Messiah and have left the community to return to Judaism.<sup>5</sup>

### III. Ultra-Johannine Opponents

Before I discuss the details of the five basic views, it will be helpful to analyze a trend which many Johannine scholars have embraced and which figures prominently into many of the proposed reconstructions, namely the belief that the secessionists of 1 John are “ultra-Johannine” Christians, or progressives.<sup>6</sup> The most notable proponent of this theory has been Raymond Brown, who made it the basis of his magisterial commentary on the Johannine Epistles in the Anchor Bible series.<sup>7</sup> The

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4 “Judaizing” is here used in its proper intransitive sense to speak of a person who follows Jewish practices.

5 These categories, broad as they are, can function only as general groupings. In some cases, they may be either too precise or too broad. For example, some commentators do not distinguish between docetism, gnosticism, separation Christology, and progressive enthusiasm. Their views could be placed in more than one camp. Thus, the categories are somewhat subjective and should be taken as a heuristic device that will allow grouping according to similarity.

6 The term “ultra-Johannine” was coined by Philipp Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 472. Otto Schwankl, “Aspekte der johanneischen Christologie,” in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminar* (ed. G. van Belle, J. G. Van der Watt, and P. Maritz; BETL 184; Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 369, calls them “johanneische Extremisten.” The term “progressives” has become popular on the basis of *προάγγων* in 2 John 9. See Chapter 6 for my analysis of the term.

7 Brown, *Epistles*, 69–115. Both J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (HNTC; New York: Harper and Row, 1973), and Klaus Wengst, *Der erste, zweite und dritte Brief des Johannes* (ÖTKNT 16; Würzburg: Echter, 1978), preceded Brown in this approach, but neither applied it as thoroughly. In 1909, Robert Law, had posited that 1 John was a defense of the Fourth Gospel’s meaning against gnostic misinterpretation (*Tests*, 26–34). Even earlier, in the late nineteenth century, Carl Heinrich von Weizsäcker, *The Apostolic Age of the Christian Church* (2nd ed; trans. J. Millar; New York: Putnam, 1895), 2:238–39, had likewise seen it aimed at a Gnosticism which drew support from the Johannine writings: “The Johannine tradition was now [in 1 John] defending itself with all its energy against this phase of a speculation which had drawn its support from its own teaching.” More recently, a similar approach has been adopted by Urban C. Von Wahlde, *The Johannine*

theory holds that the secessionists were initially members of the Johannine Community and adherents to the Johannine tradition, which has been substantially preserved in the Fourth Gospel. At some point, the secessionists began to develop their interpretation of the Johannine tradition in a direction that put them at odds with the rest of the community and the rest of the *Grosskirche*. As a result, the Johannine community split—the schism to which 1 John testifies. The central tenet of the “Ultra-Johannine” theory is that the secessionists developed their theology out of the original Johannine tradition. That is, they did not arrive at their beliefs by way of an influx of foreign teachings.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in

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*Commandments: 1 John and the Struggle for the Johannine Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1990), 1–8, 105; Michael Theobald, “Der Streit um Jesus als Testfall des Glaubens: Christologie im ersten Johannesbrief,” *Bibel und Kirche* 53 (1998): 183–89, who believes that 1 John was written as a cover letter for the Fourth Gospel in order to guide its interpretation. Similarly, Smalley, 1, 2, 3 *John*, xxv; Norman K. Bakken, “The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Study of Their Relationship in the Pre-Canonical Period” (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1963); Pierre Bonnard, *Les Épitres Johanniques* (CNT 2.13c; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1983), 13; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (IBT; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 253; Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (WUNT 166; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 290; Theo K. Heckel, “Die Historisierung der johanneischen Theologie im Ersten Johannesbrief,” *NTS* 50 (2004): 425–43; Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (2 vols; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 2:194; Jean Zumstein, “Zur Geschichte des johanneischen Christentums,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 122 (1997): 417–28; Michèle Morgen, “L’Évangile interprété par l’épître: Jean et I Jean,” *Foi et Vie* 86 (1987): 59–70; Hans-Josef Klauck, “Internal Opponents: The Treatment of the Secessionists in the First Epistle of John,” in *Truth and Its Victims* (eds. W. Beuken, S. Freyne and A. Weiler; Concilium 200; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 57–58, summarizes: “The dispute thus centres on the joint Johannine heritage and how it should be maintained, continued, and developed.” Hans Conzelmann, “Was von Anfang an war,” in *Neutestamentliche Studien für Rudolf Bultmann* (ed. W. Eltester; BZNW 21; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1954), 201, described 1 John as having the same relation to the Fourth Gospel as the Pastoral Epistles had to the genuine Pauline letters, i.e., to regulate the tradition by providing an “orthodox” interpretation of it and combating unorthodox trajectories. Richard I. Pervo, “Johannine Trajectories in the *Acts of John*,” *Apocrypha* 3 (1992), 62, observes that “Most reconstructions of the opponents of the writer of 1 John now regard them as ‘Johannine’ in inspiration.”

- 8 Brown, *Epistles*, 71, argues that if there were an outside influence at work on the secessionists, the author of 1 John would mention that influence and attack it. Cf. P. J. Hartin, “A Community in Crisis: The Christology of the Johannine Community as the Point at Issue,” *Neotestamentica* 19 (1985), 43; Houlden, *Epistles*, 36. For the view that the secessionists’ theology resulted from an influx of Gentiles, see John Bogart, *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism in the Johannine Community as Evident in the First Epistle of John* (SBLDS 33; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 134–35. Culpepper, *Gospel*, 51, believes the opponents derived their views from a combination of Greek dualism and the Fourth Gospel’s high Christology. Painter, “Opponents,” 49–50, thinks the opponents were mainly Gentiles who entered the community after it left

order to understand the secessionists' views, we must analyze how they were developed from the Fourth Gospel. Likewise, in order to understand 1 John, we must recognize that it represents an intra-Johannine battle over the community's tradition. The author of 1 John is disputing the secessionist interpretation of the tradition and providing his own "conservative" take on the message. He appeals back to the "beginning," perhaps to older strands of the Johannine tradition that received less emphasis in the Fourth Gospel.

The theory of ultra-Johannine opponents can be incorporated into several of the traditional identifications of the secessionists. Some see the Johannine progressives as taking the tradition in a "Gnosticizing" direction and propose that the Johannine schism gave birth to the gnostic sects that produced works such as the *Apocryphon of John* and the *Acts of John*.<sup>9</sup> Others think the secessionists took the high Christology of the Fourth Gospel, with its emphasis on the divine Son's pre-existence and glory, in a docetic direction and denied the true humanity and suffering of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Many, though, do not believe that by the time of 1 John the secessionists had arrived at full-blown docetism but had begun to relativize and marginalize the life, earthly ministry, and death of Jesus, perhaps by emphasizing the present ministry of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup> Others think that the Fourth Gospel was being

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the synagogue and therefore lacked the Jewish context in which to make sense of John's Christology. Birger Olsson, "The History of the Johannine Movement," in *Aspects of the Johannine Literature* (ed. L. Hartman and B. Olsson; Uppsala: Almqvist, 1987), 32, sees the secession occurring after the community moved to Asia Minor.

- 9 Pervo, "Trajectories," 48, 68; Wengst, *Brief*, 25; Houlden, *Epistles*, 17–18. Koester, *Introduction*, 2:198, believes the "crude docetism" of the *Acts of John* was "clearly a later development of the earlier Logos Christology to which the Gospel of John was closely related." Cf. Harold Attridge, "Johannine Christianity," in *Cambridge History of Christianity: Volume 1, Origins to Constantine* (ed. M. Mitchell and F. M. Young; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 125–44. Jean Zumstein, "La Communauté johannique et son histoire," in *La Communauté johannique et son histoire* (ed. J.-D. Kaestli, J.-M. Poffet, and J. Zumstein; Paris: Labor et Fides, 1990), 364, speaks also of a gnosticizing trajectory. Cf. Olsson, "History," 27–42; Pieter J. Lalleman, *The Acts of John: A Two-Stage Initiation into Johannine Gnosticism* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 111–22; Titus Nagel, "Zur Gnostisierung der johanneischen Tradition: Das 'Geheime Evangelium nach Johannes' (Apokryphon Johannis) als gnostische Zusatzoffenbarung zum vierten Evangelium," in *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditionsgegeschichtlicher Perspektive* (ed. J. Frey and U. Schnelle; WUNT 175; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 675–93.
- 10 Culpepper, *Gospel*, 253; Josef Blank, *Krisis: Untersuchungen zur johanneischen Christologie und Eschatologie* (Freiburg: Lambertus, 1964), 174–77, thinks that the dispute is over Johannine *Shekinah* Christology which has been taken in a docetic direction by the opponents.
- 11 See below, p. 83.

interpreted in terms of a temporary-possession Christology, which would later be associated with Cerinthus.<sup>12</sup>

Proponents of this view are usually careful to distinguish the Johannine tradition (upon which the secessionists built) from the Fourth Gospel.<sup>13</sup> In its present state, the Fourth Gospel contains elements that would not be agreeable to the secessionists. These elements, it is supposed, must have been added to the Gospel in the wake of the secessionist controversy by one of the “orthodox” members who remained with the community.

### A. The Role of the Johannine Community Hypothesis

A major contributor to the “ultra-Johannine” theory has been the Johannine Community Hypothesis. The development of the Community Hypothesis is well known and has been rehearsed so many times that it need only be summarized here.<sup>14</sup> Four basic tenets

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- 12 Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 76; Pamela E. Kinlaw, *The Christ is Jesus: Metamorphosis, Possession, and Johannine Christology* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 85.
  - 13 Brown is a notable exception. In order to avoid circular argumentation in his reconstruction, he methodologically identifies the Fourth Gospel with the Johannine tradition: “Every idea of the secessionists (as reconstructed from the polemic of I and II John) can be plausibly explained as derivative from the Johannine tradition as preserved for us in GJohn” (*Epistles*, 72; italics original).
  - 14 According to Robert Kysar, “The Whence and Whither of the Johannine Community,” in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John’s Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown* (ed. John R. Donahue; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2005), 67, the first to use the term “Johannine community” as it is used today was Jan A. Bühner, *Der Gesandte und sein Weg im vierten Evangelium: Die kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Grundlagen der johanneischen Sendungschristologie sowie ihre traditionsgeschichtliche Entwicklung* (WUNT 2.2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1977), 1. Kysar, “Whence,” 67–70, identifies four events that he calls “originating events” that birthed the community concept in Johannine scholarship: 1) Raymond Brown’s commentary on the Fourth Gospel (1966) and monograph on the Johannine community (1979), both of which provided a history of the community and traced the Gospel’s composition along that timeline. Brown’s commentary on the Epistles (1982) provided the most developed form of his theory. 2) J. L. Martyn’s two-level hypothesis, formulated in his 1968 work, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, (3rd ed.; Louisville: Westminster, 2003 [1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1968]). Martyn argued that the community’s expulsion from the synagogue was the defining moment in the community’s history. He used that event to show how the community’s history was transposed back upon its narrative of Jesus. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 107, calls Martyn’s *History* “the most important single work on the Gospel since Bultmann’s commentary.” 3) Wayne Meeks’ social-scientific analysis of

constitute the Community Hypothesis in its classic form:<sup>15</sup> 1) The Fourth Gospel is the product of a multi-stage process of composition that likely included several authors or groups. These literary levels can be detected, in the first place, by the presence of redactional “seams” or “aporias.” 2) The community which produced the Gospel is best characterized as a sect or a sectarian group separate from mainstream early Christianity that possesses its own distinct tradition. The closest parallel may be the Qumran community. 3) The community’s history corresponds to the compositional process of the Gospel. The stages of the community’s history are parallel to the stages of the Gospel’s composition. As the community encountered new challenges, the tradition grew to reflect and address those challenges. 4) Because the Fourth Gospel was written for the community and addresses community issues, the community’s history may be read out of the

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the Johannine community in “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 44–72. Meeks contended that the community was best understood as a minority sect or a sectarian counter-cultural group. 4) The discoveries at Qumran and subsequent analyses supported the community hypothesis by providing a historical parallel. Qumran, like the Johannine community, was a sectarian group that produced literature for their community that reflected its own history.

- 15 Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 9–12, outlines seven characteristics of what he calls the “dominant approach,” which he attempts to refute in his work: 1) Rejection of early church testimony (i.e., external evidence) in favor of internal evidence regarding questions of authorship and location. 2) Rejection of the Fourth Gospel’s historicity in favor of its sociohistorical or sociological character. 3) The attempt to reconstruct the Fourth Gospel’s literary prehistory through the detection of aporias. 4) The belief that the Johannine community was a small, sectarian and idiosyncratic group that produced, and was the intended audience for, the Fourth Gospel. Bauckham attributes the popularity of this point to the existence of the Johannine letters, which have allowed reconstruction of the community in a way that is not possible for the Synoptic Gospels. 5) The belief that the developments in the community’s history can be deduced from the examination of the literary and compositional history of the Gospel. For example, M. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus* (CBET 17; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 44, asserts that “communal history and composition history are inseparable.” 6) The use of a two-level reading technique whereby the story of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is read as a coded history of the community. 7) The belief that the Fourth Gospel should be situated in a Jewish context and should be read against the backdrop of the community’s expulsion from the synagogue. For other summaries of the dominant approach, see Olsson, “History,” 28–29; R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1975), 267–76.

Fourth Gospel's story of Jesus.<sup>16</sup> In its strongest form, proposed by J. L. Martyn, this tenet holds that the Fourth Gospel's story of Jesus is a "two-level drama" where the story of the community has been temporally transposed back into the story of Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

### B. Reconstructions of the Community's History

The Community Hypothesis naturally lends itself to detailed reconstruction of the community's history. Most reconstructions,

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16 R. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 7, reads "the Gospel as a key to church life thirty to sixty years after Jesus' lifetime." He is able to find in the Fourth Gospel coded references to no fewer than six groups: 1) Jews who expelled Johannine Christians from the synagogue, 2) "crypto-Christians" who remain in the synagogue, 3) followers of John the Baptist, 4) Jewish Christians who have a low Christology and anti-sacramental tendencies, 5) Apostolic Christians who follow Peter and the Twelve and do not belong to a Johannine church, 6) Johannine Christians. See *Community*, 59–91.

17 In his *History*, 35–68, he summarizes his theory: "The text presents its witness on two levels: (1) It is a witness to an *einmalig* event during Jesus' earthly lifetime .... (2) The text is also a witness to Jesus' powerful presence in actual events experienced by the Johannine church" (p. 40). Martyn uses John 9 as his primary example: "Presented as a formal drama, and allowed to mount its actors, so to speak, on a two-level stage so that each is actually a pair of actors playing two parts simultaneously, John 9 impresses upon us its immediacy in such a way as to strongly suggest that some of its element reflect actual experiences of the Johannine community" (p. 46). Martyn is careful to nuance his theory at this point: "John was neither playing a kind of code-game, nor trying to instruct members of his church about points of correspondence between the Jewish hierarchy of Jesus' day and that of their own day. One may be confident that he did not intend his readers to analyze the *dramatis personae* in the way in which we have done it. Indeed, I doubt that he was himself *analytically conscious* of what I have termed the two-level drama" (89). According to Martyn, the Gospel inherited the two-level schema from Jewish apocalypticism, which sees history as a two-level drama taking place in heaven and on earth (130–32). The Fourth Gospel has, of course, modified this schema in that a) both his levels are on earth, b) one level is temporally past (i.e., the two levels are not simultaneous as in apocalyptic literature), and c) "John does not in any overt way indicate to his reader a distinction between the two stages" (131). More importantly, however, the two-level drama springs from the work of the Paraclete, as it continues Jesus' work and recreates Jesus' experiences on earth through the community. "*It is, therefore, precisely the Paraclete who creates the two-level drama.*" (140, italics original). For further examples of the application of a two-level reading, see Kevin B. Quast, *Peter and the Beloved Disciple: Figures for a Community in Crisis* (JSNTSup 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989). See below, fn. 2828, for a discussion of recent critiques of the theory of a two-level drama.

though, can be boiled down to three or four basic stages:<sup>18</sup> 1) *Pre-Gospel*. During this period, the Johannine community (led by the Beloved Disciple) was a Jewish messianic sect that included Samaritans and followers of John the Baptist. Rising tensions with the Jews due to the group's increasingly higher Christology led to expulsion from the synagogue (possibly through the *Birkhat Ha-Minim*, ca. 85 CE),<sup>19</sup> 2) *Gospel*. The Fourth Gospel was written ca. 90 CE as a response to the expulsion from the synagogue. It was based on the testimony of the Beloved Disciple. 3) *Letters*. After breaking with the synagogue, divergent interpretations of the Johannine tradition caused rising tensions within the community and eventually led to a schism when the more progressive group seceded from the community. The Johannine Epistles are a response to this secession. 4) *Post-Letters*. In the wake of the schism, those remaining in the Johannine community edited the Fourth Gospel, adding elements to clarify its meaning and ward off the secessionists' errors.<sup>20</sup> They gradually moved closer to the

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18 For overviews of community history see Brown, *Community*, 171–82; J. L. Martyn, “Glimpses into the History of the Johannine Community,” in *L’Évangile de Jean: Sources, redaction, théologie* (ed. M. de Jonge; Leuven: Duculot, 1977), 150–75; Culpepper, *Gospel*, 55–61; Hartin, “Community,” 37–49; Olsson, “History,” 30–32; Zumstein, “Communauté,” 359–74; G. Richter, “Die Fleischwerdung des Logos im Johannesevangelium,” in *Studien zum Johannesevangelium* (ed. Josef Hainz; BU 13; Regensburg: Pustet, 1977), 149–98.

19 Martyn saw the Birkhat reflected in the Gospel’s references to followers of Jesus being put out of the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2; ἀποσυνάγωγος), which he took as a “formal separation between church and synagogue” (Martyn, *History*, 56).

20 Most frequently identified as redactional are John 15–17, the sacramental imagery throughout the Gospel (e.g. 6:51–58; 19:34–35), the prologue (1:1–18) and epilogue (ch. 21), and various passages which contain future eschatology. See Richter, “Fleischwerdung,” 149–98; Jürgen Becker, “Die Abschiedsreden Jesu im Johannesevangelium,” *ZNW* 61 (1970): 215–46; Painter “Christology and the History of the Johannine Community in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel,” *NTS* 30 (1984): 460–74, who focuses on the anti-docetic redaction of the Prologue. While he does believe that the Fourth Gospel was substantially redacted, Brown, *Epistles*, 73, does not appeal to redaction of the Fourth Gospel in his exposition of the Epistles because he does not want to engage in a circular argument by claiming that every passage in John which seems to be anti-secessionist was added by an anti-secessionist redactor. He prefers to argue that such passages were instead downplayed by the secessionists. Indeed, Brown finds divergences in theology between the redactor of John and the author of 1 John (e.g., the ecclesiastical authoritarianism of John 21, missing in 1 John). He concludes that the redactor of the Fourth Gospel is a different figure from the epistolary author. A significant minority of scholars take a different route and believe that the Fourth Gospel was originally (that is, not as a result of later redaction) anti-docetic. See, e.g., Udo Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John: An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 52–53, who believes that 1 John was written before the



mainstream church and eventually joined it.<sup>21</sup> The secessionists, on the other hand, freed from the conservative influence of the community, became progressively more “gnostic” or “docetic” and eventually merged with movements such as the Montanists, Cerinthians, Valentinians, or Sethians.<sup>22</sup>

For the purposes of our discussion, the most important point is that the Epistles are assigned to a later stage than the Gospel and are thought to respond to a different situation from the one faced by the earlier community. While the Gospel is aimed at external opponents (the Jews) and shows no sign that secession has occurred, the Letters address an internal opposition and primarily deal with the secession.<sup>23</sup>

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Gospel; Talbert, *Reading John*, 56–57; Wolfram Uebele, *Viele Verführer sind in die Welt ausgegangen: Die Gegner in den Briefen des Ignatius von Antiochien und in den Johannesbriefen* (BWANT 151; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001).

21 Brown, *Epistles*, 103.

22 Some believe that the “secessionists” may actually have been in the majority in the community. Hans-Josef Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief* (EKKNT 23.1; Zürich: Benziger, 1991), 32–33, does not believe that the secessionists were ever officially excommunicated; in fact, it may have been the author and his group who were expelled. He further theorizes on the basis of 1 John 4:5 that the secessionists were enjoying great success in their new endeavors. So also Brown, *Community*, 145–149; *Epistles*, 70. On the eventual merger with Gnosticism, see Smalley, 1, 2, 3 *John*, xxviii; Attridge, “Johannine,” 125. Oscar 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* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 61, believed that Ignatius was a successor to the Johannine circle and that Ignatius’s opponents were the remnants of the secessionists. It is common now to contrast the frequent use of John by second-century Gnostics with its relative disuse by the “orthodox” church, and to hold that this is the result of the Johannine secessionists’ merger with gnostic streams of Christianity. When the secessionists took the Johannine tradition into the emerging Gnosticism, the mainstream church became hesitant to make use of John—this may be called “orthodox Johannophobia.”

23 See Brown, *Epistles*, 34–36; Rodney Whitacre, *Johannine Polemic: The Role of Tradition and Theology*, (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982), 4, who notes as evidence the prevalence of appeals to the OT in John, but their absence in 1 John. There are no clear indications of the precise dates the Letters were written, or how long after the Fourth Gospel, but Brown, *Epistles*, 101, theorizes that 1 John must have been written long enough after the Fourth Gospel for a debate to have arisen over the interpretation of that work. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*. (Hermeneia; trans. R. Philip O’Hara; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 1; Painter, 1, 2, and 3 *John*, 21.

## C. Weaknesses of the Ultra-Johannine Theory

At this point there is no need to discuss in precise detail the weaknesses of the Ultra-Johannine Opponents theory. I will enumerate them below when I deal with the way each view makes use of the theory. Some general observations, however, may be offered here. First, such an approach requires a lot of speculation. The secessionists' understanding of the Fourth Gospel must be reconstructed by way of an intensive mirror-reading of 1 John which assumes that virtually every statement in the epistle is polemical and can therefore be used to reconstruct the opponents. This type of mirror-reading results in a detailed picture of the secessionists that has very little hard evidence to support it.<sup>24</sup> In fact, as Julian Hills observes, almost all reconstructions of the community's history with the secessionists are ultimately founded upon a single piece of evidence in 1 John 2:19.<sup>25</sup>

Second, scholars are increasingly questioning the overly confident reconstructions of the Johannine community.<sup>26</sup> Many have begun to doubt the assumption that the Fourth Gospel reflects a "sect" or an esoteric group whose writings are narrowly aimed at insiders only.<sup>27</sup>

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- 24 Brown, *Community*, 7, admirably cautions that his views "claim at most probability" and "if sixty percent of my detective work is accepted, I shall be happy indeed." Those who have followed in Brown's footsteps, however, have been less modest in their assessments and have more or less written as if Brown's theories are established fact.
- 25 J. Hills, "A Genre for 1 John," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. B. A. Pearson and A. T. Kraabel; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 375.
- 26 See R. Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (ed. R. Bauckham; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9–48; R. Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); Colleen M. Conway, "The Production of the Johannine Community: A New Historicist Perspective," *JBL* 121 (2002): 479–95; E. W. Klink, "The Gospel Community Debate: State of the Question," *CurBS* 3 (2004): 60–85; R. Kysar, "Whence and Whither," 65–81; A. Reinhartz, "The Johannine Community and Its Jewish Neighbors: A Reappraisal," in "What Is John?" Vol. 2, *Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (ed. F. F. Segovia. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 111–38. M. Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage: Ein Lösungsversuch* (WUNT 67; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), also offers a detailed challenge to the hypothesis.
- 27 See Kåre Sigvald Fuglseth, *Johannine Sectarianism in Perspective: A Sociological, Historical, and Comparative Analysis of Temple and Social Relationships in the Gospel of John, Philo, and Qumran* (NovTSup 119; Leiden: Brill, 2005); Bauckham, "For Whom," 9–48. For critiques of Bauckham, see D. C. Sim, "The Gospels for All Christians? A Response to Richard Bauckham," *JSNT* 84 (2001): 3–27; P. F. Esler, "Community and Gospel in Early Christianity: A Response to Richard Bauckham's *Gospels for all*

Even more, the two-level reading has suffered enormously upon closer inspection, as scholars have become more cognizant of the imagination and speculation involved in mirror-reading a narrative.<sup>28</sup>

Third, there is little external evidence that a Johannine “school” ever flourished, much less merged with gnostic sects. As M. Hengel notes, in the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp, the two Apostolic Fathers considered most “Johannine” in their theology, there is no trace of a Johannine “school.”<sup>29</sup> While certain gnostic texts did use John, son of Zebedee, as their “gnostic” apostle, this does not demonstrate the existence of a Johannine school any more than the Gospel of Thomas proves the existence of a “Thomasine school.” Gnostic writers made use of all twelve apostles at one time or another to establish the antiquity of their teachings. P. Lalleman, in his investigation of the *Acts of John*, remarks, “The absence of evidence for a Johannine community in the AJ is most remarkable: if anywhere, then it is in the AJ that one would expect to find evidence for its existence in the second century.”<sup>30</sup> The scholars who claim that the early church suffered from “orthodox Johannophobia” because gnostics preferred the Gospel have significantly overstated the extent of gnostic use of the

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*Christians*,” *SJT* 51 (1998): 235–48; Margaret M. Mitchell, “Patristic Counter-Evidence to the Claim that ‘The Gospels Were Written for All Christians,’” *NTS* 51 (2005): 36–79; E. Van Eck, “A Sitz for the Gospel of Mark? A Critical Reaction to Bauckham’s Theory on the Universality of the Gospels,” *HvTSt* 56 (2000): 973–1008.

- 28 See the early critique of L. T. Johnson, “On Finding Lukan Community: A Cautious Cautionary Essay,” *SBLSP* (1979): 87–100. More recent critiques include D. A. Carson, “The Challenge of the Balkanization of Johannine Studies,” in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1* (ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 133–64; A. Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel,” *TrinJ* 26 (2005): 208–14; Tobias Hägerland, “John’s Gospel: A Two-Level Drama?” *JSNT* 25 (2003): 309–22; E. W. Klink, “Expulsion from the Syngague? Rethinking a Johannine Anachronism,” *TynBul* 59 (2008): 99–118; Kysar, “Whence and Whither,” 65–81; R. Kysar, “The Expulsion from the Synagogue: The Tale of a Theory,” in *Voyages with John: Charting the Fourth Gospel* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), 237–46; Reinhartz, “Johannine Community,” 111–38. For a similar critique of a mirror-reading approach to Mark, see Dwight N. Peterson, *The Origins of Mark: The Markan Community in Current Debate* (BibInt 48; Leiden: Brill, 2000).
- 29 Hengel, *Frage*, 97–99, 221–22, 248–52, 325. Cf. C. Cebulj, “Johannesevangelium und Johannesbriefe,” in *Schulen im Neuen Testament? Zur Stellung des Urchristentums in der Bildungswelt seiner Zeit, mit einem Beitrag zur johanneischen Schule von Christian Cebulj* (ed. Thomas Schmeller; HBS 30; Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 254–342.
- 30 Lalleman, *Acts*, 246. Cf. K. Schäferdiek, “Herkunft und Interesse der alten Johannesakten,” *ZNW* 74 (1983), 247–67, who finds the *Acts* late (third century) and “anti-Johannine.”

Fourth Gospel and understated the evidence for orthodox use.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the idea that one can clearly trace the post-history of the secessionists is proving less than convincing.

Fourth, if the crisis in the Johannine community centered on the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel or Johannine tradition, it is impossible to explain why 1 John contains no explicit allusions to, or quotations from, the Gospel.<sup>32</sup> Brown admits that 1 John does not explicitly quote the Fourth Gospel, but claims that this is because the author draws on an earlier stratum ("the beginning") of Johannine tradition not preserved in the Fourth Gospel to refute the progressives.<sup>33</sup> Jean Zumstein similarly proposes that the Fourth Gospel is never explicitly used in the Epistles because it was also used by the opponents and "ils n'ont donc plus la capacité d'arbitrer le conflit."<sup>34</sup> This, however, would be like a Supreme Court opinion which never explicitly spoke about or quoted from the Constitution, even though the very issue before the court was the interpretation of that Constitution.

Finally, and most importantly, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, the reconstruction of the secessionists and their supposed views lacks a defensible exegetical basis in the Johannine

31 See Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), for a recent forceful challenge to the theory of "orthodox Johannophobia." What is particularly striking in debate between gnostic and Orthodox theologians in the second and third centuries is the fact that the gnostics never employ (and are never accused of employing) the Fourth Gospel in the way the ultra-Johannine theory suggests they might. For example, Origen, in his work against Heracleon's late second-century commentary on the Gospel, primarily attacks Heracleon's demiurgical views and his deterministic anthropology, for which Heracleon claimed support from the Gospel. In Origen's rebuttal there is no indication that Heracleon appealed to the Fourth Gospel to support a docetic Christology or a denial of the value of Jesus' earthly life or death. See Harold W. Attridge, "Heracleon and John: Reassessment of an Early Christian Hermeneutical Debate," in *Biblical Interpretation: History, Context, and Reality* (ed. C. Helmer and T. Petrey; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 57–72; cf. J.-D. Kaestli, "Remarques sur le rapport du quatrième Évangile avec la gnose et sa réception au II<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *La Communauté johannique et son histoire* (ed. J.-D. Kaestli, J.-M. Poffet, and J. Zumstein; Paris: Labor et Fides, 1990), 351–56, for a discussion of gnostic interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the second century. Cf. also Elaine H. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (SBLMS 17; Nashville: Abingdon, 1973).

32 My point here is not that echoes of the Fourth Gospel are completely absent from 1–3 John, but that if the central issue in the community's dispute is the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, one would certainly expect more than echoes.

33 Brown, *Epistles*, 71–72.

34 Zumstein, "Communauté," 364.

Epistles. Upon a close reading, it will become evident that the key passages in 1 and 2 John do not refer to Johannine progressives who have taken the tradition in an extreme direction.

#### IV. Gnostic Opponents

A longstanding and venerable interpretation of 1 John holds that it was intended to address the gnostic heresy.<sup>35</sup> This view can trace its pedigree back as far as Irenaeus, who used 1 John to refute Cerinthus and other gnostics, and Tertullian, who used the epistle to combat the teachings of Marcion.<sup>36</sup> For the purposes of our discussion, though, I will distinguish Gnosticism from separation Christology (associated with Cerinthus) and docetism. While these two beliefs were often part of a broader gnostic framework, some scholars believe that when 1 John addressed them, they were not both part of that larger framework. In modern scholarship, an anti-gnostic reading was pursued in earnest by the history-of-religions school, especially Michaelis,<sup>37</sup> Pfeiderer,<sup>38</sup> Weizsäcker,<sup>39</sup> Holtzmann,<sup>40</sup> Hilgenfeld,<sup>41</sup> Windisch and Preisker,<sup>42</sup> and

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35 Those who take 1 John as an anti-gnostic polemic include Bogart, *Orthodox*, 131, who finds the opponents close to Valentinianism; Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894), 17–21; Law, *Tests*, 26–34; Adolf Jülicher, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. Janet Penrose Ward; New York: Putnam, 1904), 429; J. Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1911), 586; W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (trans. Paul Feine; Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 441–42, who sees a gnostic enthusiasm with a docetic Christology and antinomian ethic. Because the Gnosticism was manifesting itself in a Christological form, as opposed to the merely ethical one Kümmel finds in Colossians, the Pastoral Epistles, Jude, and 2 Peter, he believes that it is a developed form of Gnosticism.

36 For Irenaeus, see *Haer.* 3.16. For Tertullian, see his *De carne Christi* and *Adversus Marcionem*. Later, Epiphanius would also make extensive use of 1 John in his polemic against a variety of gnostic sects in his *Panarion*.

37 Johann David Michaelis, *Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd ed; trans. H. Marsh; London: Rivington, 1802), 4:402–3.

38 Otto Pfeiderer, *Primitive Christianity: Its Writings and Teachings in their Historical Connections* (trans. W. Montgomery; New York: Putnam, 1911), 4:81, 154–64, thought the opponents were closest to Basilidean thought.

39 Weizsäcker, *Apostolic Age*, 2:238–39.

40 H. J. Holtzmann, *Briefe und Offenbarung des Johannes* (HKNT 4; Freiburg: Mohr, 1893), 268, 272, considered Saturninus's teaching the closest parallel.

41 A. Hilgenfeld, *Historisch-kritisch Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Leipzig: Fues, 1875), 682–94.

later Bultmann.<sup>43</sup> In English scholarship, Robert Law, in his influential *Tests of Faith*, adopted the same explanation.<sup>44</sup> C. H. Dodd conjectured that the Hermetic mystical tradition may have been in the background.<sup>45</sup> In more recent years, J. Bogart identified the opponents as Valentinian gnostics, and W. Schmithals<sup>46</sup> has also fiercely advocated Gnosticism as the proper backdrop for the Epistles.<sup>47</sup> As recently as 1963 A. Wikenhauser could write, "at the present day there is hardly any further doubt that it was a gnostic error."<sup>48</sup>

### A. Exegetical Basis for the Theory of Gnostic Opponents

These scholars all drew primarily on the ancient heresiologists (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Epiphanius) for their understanding of Gnosticism. In their interpretation of 1 John they depended both on those statements which explicitly referred to

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42 Hans Windisch and Herbert Preisker, *Die katholischen Briefe* (3rd ed; HNT 15; Tübingen: Mohr, 1951), 127–28. Cf. W. Lütgert, *Die johanneische Christologie* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1916), 1–49.

43 Bultmann, *Epistles*, 8, 11, 38–39. He calls them "gnosticizing Christians" (11) and theorizes that the entire letter is a polemic against them. "The doctrine of the heretics is rooted in the dualism of Gnosticism, which asserts the exclusive antithesis between God and the sensible world" (38). "Gnostic thought cannot comprehend the offense which the Christian idea of revelation offers, namely, the paradox that a historical event (or historical form) is the eschatological event (or form)" (38).

44 Law, *Tests*, 26–34. He concludes: "all the authentic features of Gnosticism, its false estimate of knowledge, its loveless and unbrotherly spirit, its Docetic Christology, its exaltation of the illuminated above moral obligations, are clearly reflected."

45 C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (MNTC 19; New York: Harper, 1946), xix.

46 Walter Schmithals, *Das Neue Testament und Gnosis* (EdF 208; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 104–10; Walter Schmithals, *Johannes-evangelium und Johannesbriefe: Forschungsgeschichte und Analyse* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 277–89; cf. Walter Schmithals, *The Theology of the First Christians* (trans. O. C. Dean; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 306–7, where he hints that Marcionite thought may be the target of the Epistles.

47 Cf. Koester, *Introduction*, 2:195–96; Harold S. Songer, "The Life Situation of the Johannine Epistles," *RevExp* 67 (1970): 399–409; Josef Blank, "Die Irrlehrer des ersten Johannesbriefes," *Kairos* 26 (1984), 167; J. Beutler, "Krise und Untergang der johanneischen Gemeinde: Das Zeugnis der Johannesbriefe," in *Studien zu den johanneischen Schriften* (SBAB 25; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1998), 100; F. V. Filson, "1 John: Purpose and Message," *Int* 23 (1969): 259–76; see also K. Weiss, "Die 'Gnosis' im Hintergrund und im Spiegel der Johannesbriefe," in *Gnosis und Neues Testament* (ed. K. W. Tröger; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1973), 341–56, for a discussion of gnostic elements in the opponents' theology.

48 Alfred Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (trans. Joseph Cunningham; New York: Herder and Herder, 1958), 523.

opponents (2:22–23; 4:2–3; 2 John 7) as well as those which implied opposition, such as the antitheses of the first two chapters. Even more, they detected in many of the positive emphases of 1 John attacks upon gnostic opponents. A survey of the passages identified as anti-gnostic in the epistle yields the following profile of the opponents:<sup>49</sup> 1) They were docetists who denied either the physicality of Jesus (1:1; 4:2–3), the fullness of the incarnation (by advocating a temporary possession model à la Cerinthus; 2:22), or the reality of his death (5:6–7).<sup>50</sup> 2) They were libertines or antinomians who claimed that because they were the spiritual seed of God, and because they knew God, they did not need to keep the commandments or to express love in tangible ways (1:6; 2:1–6, 9–11; 2:29–3:10; 5:17).<sup>51</sup> 3) As the spiritual seed of God, they claimed to be sinlessly perfect (1:8, 10).<sup>52</sup> 4) They taught that the Godhead was composed of a plurality of aeons so that there was both light and darkness in God (1:5).<sup>53</sup> 5) They viewed reception of knowledge

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49 For summaries, see Weizsäcker, *Apostolic Age*, 2:239; Pfleiderer, *Primitive Christianity*, 4:154–64; Law, *Tests*, 26–34; Plummer, *Epistles*, 17–21; Bogart, *Orthodox*, 25–26, 123–26; Weiss, “Gnosis,” 341–56.

50 G. W. MacRae, “Gnosticism and the Church of John’s Gospel,” in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism, and Early Christianity* (ed. Charles W. Hedrick and Robert Hodgson, Jr.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), 95, argues on the basis of the supposed docetism in 1 John that the opponents are not merely proto-gnostics, but full-fledged gnostics, because there are no forms of docetism in the 2nd century which are not gnostic.

51 Law, *Tests*, 29, calls the “if we say” statements “almost verbal quotations of current forms of Gnostic profession.” R. Bultmann, “Analyse des ersten Johannesbriefes,” in *Festgabe für Adolf Jülicher* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1927), 138–58, likewise thought that the “seed” terminology of 1 John derived from a gnostic source. Cf. Michaelis, *Introduction*, 4:404.

52 The most extensive treatment of this idea against a gnostic background is Bogart, *Orthodox and Heretical Perfectionism*. He distinguishes heretical perfectionism, which is combated in 1 John, from orthodox perfectionism, which was taught in the Fourth Gospel and modified slightly in 1 John (2). Orthodox perfectionism as taught in 1 John incorporates the doctrine of expiation through Jesus’ atoning death and the distinction between mortal and non-mortal sins. It also advocates gradual improvement toward sinlessness. Heretical perfectionism, on the other hand, “arose out of a gnostic view of creation and man *radically foreign* to that found in the Gospel of John.” It likely entered the community via an influx of Gentiles. This gnostic anthropology taught that humans were part of the divine essence (34). Cf. Harry C. Swadling, “Sin and Sinlessness in 1 John,” *SJT* 35 (1982), 206–09, who addresses 1 John 3:6, 9 in light of Gnosticism. Cf. Michaelis, *Introduction*, 4:405, who finds the use of τελειώω a mark of gnostic perfectionism.

53 Weizsäcker, *Apostolic Age*, 2:239, speaks of “the thought of a darkness in the Godhead.” Cf. Michaelis, *Introduction*, 4:408–9, who reads 1:5 in the same way, and adds that 2:23 probably points to a demiurgical conception on the part of the opponents.

(γνῶσις) as the means of salvation, rather than the atoning death of Jesus (1:6–7; 2:2).<sup>54</sup> 6) They were enthusiasts who emphasized charismatic experience over the historical teachings of Jesus, claimed elite status because of their special anointing (2:20, 27; 3:24; 4:1–6; 5:6–8),<sup>55</sup> and pushed a progressive version of the faith (2 John 9).<sup>56</sup> 7) Because of their enthusiasm they taught an over-realized eschatology and denied a future judgment (2:28).<sup>57</sup> 8) They charged the Apostles with corrupting the teaching of Jesus (hence the emphasis on the “beginning” in 1 John 1:1–3; 2:13–14, 24).<sup>58</sup>

## B. Weaknesses with the Theory of Gnostic Opponents

### 1. Dating Issues

The first major weakness with the gnostic opponent theory is that Gnosticism most likely belongs to a later historical period than that of the Johannine Epistles. It is thus anachronistic to call the opponents

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54 As B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes* (London: Macmillan, 1902), 140, puts it, the Epistle opposes gnostics who attempted “to separate the ‘ideas’ of the Faith from the facts of the historic Redemption.” Weiss, “Gnosis,” 343, argues similarly that the opponents confessed a gnostic Christ of “äonischen Charakters” and “sie lehnen eine Heilsgeschichte ab.” PHEME Perkins, “Gnostic Revelation and Johannine Sectarianism: Reading 1 John from the Perspective of Nag Hammadi,” in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminary* (ed. G. Van Belle, J. G. van der Watt, and P. Maritz; BETL 184; Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 245–76, discusses how gnostic texts such as the *Trimorphic Protennoia* diminished the importance of the earthly career of Jesus and identified the salvific locus as Jesus’ ascension to the archons, at which point he took his position as revealer of the truth. Cf. also P. Perkins, *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 161, where she argues that the debate between the author of 1 John and the opponents centered on whether Jesus’ death had atoning significance. She sees the opponents’ position paralleled in Valentinus, who viewed the cross mainly as a revelation. J. D. Turner, “Sethian Gnosticism and Johannine Christianity,” in *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel: Essays by the Members of the SNTS Johannine Writings Seminary* (ed. G. Van Belle, J. G. van der Watt, and P. Maritz; BETL 184; Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 399–434, argues for a parallel from Sethian Gnosticism which downplayed the earthly life of Jesus, his sacrificial death, and the traditional Christological titles, while depicting Jesus primarily as a revealer.

55 See C. K. Barrett, “Johannine Christianity,” in *Christian Beginnings: Word and Community from Jesus to Post-Apostolic Times* (ed. Jürgen Becker; trans. Annemarie Kidder and Reinhard Krauss; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1987), 339.

56 For a discussion of 2 John 9, see ch. 6.

57 Weiss, “Gnosis,” 343.

58 Michaelis, *Introduction*, 4:403.



“Gnostics.” While there have been numerous attempts to find evidence of pre-Christian Gnosticism (including Jewish forms),<sup>59</sup> it is generally agreed that there are no texts which clearly pre-date the NT.<sup>60</sup> The earlier German critics named above were able to identify Gnosticism as the problem in the Epistles only by dating the letters to the mid- second century.<sup>61</sup>

## 2. Methodological Issues

Second, the evidence adduced from the Epistles is methodologically suspect. The thought process of interpreters who favor the gnostic hypothesis is as follows: first, it is deduced from the clearly explicit passages (1 John 2:22–23; 4:2–3; 5:6–7 and 2 John 7) that some form of docetism or separation-Christology is in view. Second, it is assumed

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59 See, e.g. E. Haenchen, “Gab es eine vorchristliche Gnosis?” *ZTK* (1952): 316–49, who used the traditions about Simon Magus as one of his foundational pieces of evidence. See below, p. 26, for further discussion of Simon. B. Pearson is a major proponent of the theory that Gnosticism arose from pre-Christian apocalyptic Judaism. See Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, *Studies in Antiquity and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); idem, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007). James M. Robinson has been the primary advocate for the view that pre-Christian Gnosticism was a source for Christianity. See J. M. Robinson, “Sethians and Johannine Thought: The Trimorphic Prottennoia and the Prologue of the Gospel of John,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism, Volume 2: Sethian Gnosticism* (ed. Bentley Layton; SHR 41; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 643–61; idem, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

60 See Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (rev. ed; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983); idem, “Pre-Christian Gnosticism, the New Testament and Nag Hammadi in Recent Debate,” *Them* 10 (1984): 22–27; idem, “The Issue of Pre-Christian Gnosticism Reviewed in the Light of the Nag Hammadi Texts,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration* (ed. J. D. Turner and A. McGuire; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 72–88. Cf. J.-M. Sevrin, “Le Quatrième Évangile et le gnosticisme: Questions de Méthode,” in *La Communauté johannique et son histoire* (Paris: Labor et Fides, 1990), 262; F. C. Burkitt, *Church and Gnosis: A Study of Christian Thought and Speculation in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932); R. McL. Wilson, “Gnosis at Corinth,” in *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honor of C. K. Barrett* (ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson; London: SPCK, 1982), 102–19; Brown, *Epistles*, 63, notes that many of the gnostic texts show clear dependence on the Fourth Gospel. It has been argued by U. Bianchi, “Le gnosticisme et les origines du christianisme,” in *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique* (ed. Julien Ries; Lovain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste, 1982), 228, that the primary doctrine of Gnosticism, the demonization of the Creator god, could have arisen only from Christianity, in which Christ was seen as divine, and could thus be placed in opposition to the OT God.

61 E.g., Pfeleiderer: AD 140–150; Weizsäcker: AD 130–140.

that such docetism or separation-Christology must be part of a larger gnostic system. Third, the rest of the epistle (that is, statements which are not explicitly polemical) is mined for possible references to gnostic belief or behavior. Lastly, a full description of the opponents is formed which portrays them as fitting at each point the traditional picture of Gnosticism.

This process is flawed at two key points. First, even if we grant that the opponents are in some way docetic or Cerinthian, it by no means follows that they were full gnostics. Many types of docetism and separation Christology in the ancient world required no broader gnostic framework.<sup>62</sup> In keeping with this, there are no explicitly polemical statements in the Letters that indicate distinctively gnostic beliefs on the part of the opponents. Most striking is the complete lack of evidence for the trademark tenet of Gnosticism, demiurgical cosmogony. There is not even a hint in 1 John that the secessionists oppose the OT Creator to the NT Father of Christ.<sup>63</sup> The second flaw in the process is its thoroughgoing mirror-reading, in which any positive statement made by the author may be reversed to obtain the views of the opponents. This is the only way that gnostic opponents can be derived from the text of 1 John. As I argue in the next chapter, such mirror-reading is highly questionable.

### 3. Gnostic Use of 1 John

Third, there is some evidence that 1 John was actually used by gnostic sects. The Valentinian *Gospel of Truth* (I,3) has several possible references.<sup>64</sup> 1) "When they had seen him and had heard him, he

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62 See N. Brox, "'Doketismus'—eine Problemanzeige," *ZKG* 95 (1984): 313. He thinks (pp. 313–14) that docetism may have originated from a desire to avoid compromising Jewish monotheism. Gnostic docetists, on the other hand, developed their views from Hellenistic dualistic presuppositions and a philosophical scorn for the flesh.

63 Weiss, "Gnosis," 354; Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief*, 39; A. Wurm, *Die Irrlehrer im ersten Johannesbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1903), 3.

64 See J. A. Williams, *Biblical Interpretation in the Gnostic Gospel of Truth from Nag Hammadi*. (SBLDS 79; Decatur: Scholars Press, 1988), for further discussion. Cf. R. McL. Wilson, "The New Testament in the Nag Hammadi Gospel of Philip," *NTS* 9 (1962/63): 291–94; Judith Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John: History and Background* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 10. It is interesting to note that François Vouga, *Die Johannesbriefe* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), 29–31, 46–48, actually holds that 1 John is itself gnostic. That it can be read in such a way should go a long way towards refuting the view that its purpose is anti-gnostic.

granted to them to taste him and to smell him and to touch the beloved Son" (30.26–32). This allusion to 1 John 1:1–2 is all the more striking when one considers how that passage has often been understood as a cornerstone of 1 John's anti-gnostic polemic.<sup>65</sup> 2) "While their hope, for which they are waiting, is in waiting—they whose image is light with no shadow in it" (35.2–6).<sup>66</sup> This may echo the description of God in 1 John 1:5 ("God is light and there is no darkness in him") and its application to believers who walk in the light. 3) The *Gospel* mentions an "ointment" brought by Christ with which he anoints believers and makes them "perfect" (36.13–20).<sup>67</sup> This may allude to 1 John 2:20, 27 where the anointing from the Holy One gives believers all knowledge. If 1 John were intended to be anti-gnostic, it is difficult to explain why the Valentinians would positively quote from it—the very text meant to refute them—without substantial comment.<sup>68</sup>

#### 4. The Definition Debate

Perhaps the most devastating criticism of the gnostic hypothesis, however, deals with the matter of definition. What is "Gnosticism," or what are the essential defining characteristics that mark out a group or individual in the early centuries of our era as "gnostic?" For a long time, scholars were more or less content to rely on the *opponents* of the gnostics—mainly the great heresiologists of the church, like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius—for their answer to those questions. The heresiologists, however, were more interested in rhetorically characterizing their opponents than in historically and objectively defining them. Irenaeus, for example, uses

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65 Williams, *Biblical*, 106–86.

66 *Ibid.*, 144–46.

67 *Ibid.*, 150–52.

68 Irenaeus refers to the way that gnostics used Scripture: "they appear to be like us, by what they say in public, repeating the same words as we do; but inwardly they are wolves" (*Haer.* 3.16.8). This indicates that both the "gnostics" and the "orthodox" were both at least ostensibly basing their beliefs on the OT and the same early Christian texts. There is no hint that either side would see certain books of the NT as originally intended to be anti-gnostic. Similar allusions to 1 John may be found in the *Gospel of Philip* (II.3). In 74.12–20, the text speaks of an anointing received from Christ which gives its recipients "everything"; cf. 1 John 2:20, 27. The same idea also appears in 69.7–8. See Lieu, *Second*, 10; Wilson, "New Testament," 291–94. For further references to the Johannine Epistles in the Nag Hammadi Corpus, see Craig A. Evans, Robert L. Webb and Richard A. Wiebe, eds., *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index* (NTTS 18; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 535–36.

the terminology of “gnosis falsely so-called,” drawn from 1 Tim 6:20, as a catch-all for virtually every variety of teaching he deems unorthodox, no matter how diverse. He posits a single origin for all heresies: Simon Magus and his consort Helen, through whom Satan brought forth the multitude of deceivers with their demonic doctrines.<sup>69</sup> He does so because he wants to stress the heretics’ basic genetic similarity.<sup>70</sup> Irenaeus’s strategy lessens the usefulness of his work because it leads him to group very diverse teachings under the same heading, “gnosis,” thus emptying the term of its classifying power. It also leads him to tailor his descriptions of the various sects in order to stress their similarity to one another, thus diminishing the accuracy of his descriptions. Because of these shortcomings, while Irenaeus’s work provides a helpful witness to the diversity in early Christianity, it is less useful for clarifying the definition of “Gnosticism.”

The discovery in 1945 of a large cache of documents in the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi completely changed the face of gnostic studies.<sup>71</sup> The twelve Coptic codices contained works that clearly

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69 *Haer.* 1.23–28. Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 1.26, 1.56, also describes Simon the Samaritan as a teacher to Menander and perhaps related in some way to Marcion. Haenchen, “Gnosis,” 316–49, argued for the existence of pre-Christian Gnosticism on the basis of the Simon Magus traditions. K. Beyschlag, *Simon Magus und die christliche Gnosis* (WUNT 16; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1974), aims to refute Haenchen, as does R. Bergmeier, “Die Gestalt des Simon Magus in Act 8 und in der simonianischen Gnosis—Aporien einer Gesamtdeutung,” *ZNW* 77 (1986): 267–75. On the question of Simon and his role in the early church and the development of Gnosticism, see W. Meeks, “Simon Magus in Recent Research,” *Religious Studies Review* 3.3 (July 1977): 137–42, who concludes, “The use of reports about Simon Magus as evidence for a pre-Christian Gnosticism has been effectively refuted” (141); Tamás Adamik, “The Image of Simon Magus in the Christian Tradition,” in *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter: Magic, Miracles and Gnosticism* (ed. Jan N. Bremmer; SAAA 3; Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 52–64; K. Berger, “Propaganda und Gegenpropaganda im frühen Christentum: Simon Magus als Gestalt des Samaritanischen Christentums,” in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi* (ed. Lukas Bormann, et al; NovTSup 74; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 313–17; Stephen Haar, *Simon Magus: The First Gnostic?* (BZNW 119; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003); K. Rudolph, “Simon—Magus oder Gnosticus? Zum Stand der Debatte,” *TRu* 42 (1977): 279–359; G. Theissen, “Simon Magus—die Entwicklung seines Bildes vom Charismatiker zum gnostischen Erlöser: ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte der Gnosis,” in *Religionsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments: Festschrift für Klaus Berger zum 60. Geburtstag* (ed. Axel von Dobbeler, et al; Tübingen: Francke, 2000), 407–32.

70 On the other hand, however, he also wants to insist that the vast diversity of the heretics’ beliefs proves them to be purveyors of falsehood, since for Irenaeus orthodoxy is unified and uniform (see *Haer.* preface, 2).

71 For introductions to the Nag Hammadi library, see James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (3rd ed; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 1–26; B. Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987), xv–xxiii.

originated from the circles Irenaeus and the other Fathers had attacked, including the Valentians and Sethians. For the first time, scholars had access to the “gnostics” in their own words. While Nag Hammadi decisively moved the discussion beyond simple reliance on the heresiologists, it introduced a host of new problems. Nag Hammadi made it clear that Irenaeus’s descriptions and classifications were inadequate but it did not produce a new consensus on how to define “gnostic” or “Gnosticism.”

#### a. Methods of Definition

In the wake of the Nag Hammadi discoveries, three basic definitional strategies have emerged. First, one might seek a neutral starting point by beginning with those groups that used the term gnostic to describe themselves. The most vocal proponent of this method has been B. Layton.<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately, the term *gnostikos* (or its Coptic equivalent) does not appear in the Nag Hammadi texts, but only in the *testimonia* collected by the heresiologists. Therefore, it may not have been a common or distinctive self-designation used by the sects.<sup>73</sup> The use of the term by the heresiologists is not much help at this point, either, since they did not apply the term consistently or in such a way that matches the common modern idea of Gnosticism. For example, Irenaeus labels as gnostic both the Ebionites and the Encratites, groups that have little in common with sects more traditionally thought to be gnostic, such as Valentinians or Sethians.<sup>74</sup>

A second method of definition is *genealogical*. This method seeks to define Gnosticism and delineate its various sects according to their

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72 B. Layton, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. Michael White et al; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 334–50. For a critique of Layton, see Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 30–40. B. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 214–16, supports Layton’s argumentation.

73 Layton, “Prolegomena,” 344, argues to the contrary that *gnostikos* was “the name par excellence of the members of the *hairesis*, their most proper name” and that one should not expect to find it in the Nag Hammadi texts because those works are pseudepigraphic and mythic. Williams, *Rethinking*, 33, though, notes that the heresiologists do not state that the term was claimed by very many groups—the opposite of what we would expect if *gnostikos* was in fact the standard self-designation.

74 Williams, *Rethinking*, 40.

origins. H. Jonas advocated this method, believing that origins could help define essence.<sup>75</sup> The diversity within Gnosticism could be explained by the fact that it emerged in several locations simultaneously, with each variation reflecting its local color. The difficulty of reconstructing such a genealogy on the basis of the fragmentary evidence preserved in the historical record has led many to question this method's usefulness. Others have questioned it at a deeper level, challenging its assumption that origin determines essence.<sup>76</sup>

The third, and most widely accepted, method is *typological*. Also known as the *phenomenological* method, it seeks to classify texts and sects based on their common characteristics. Through inductive study, scholars may arrive at a list of characteristics common to all gnostic sects. This list would constitute the essence of Gnosticism. The difficulty with this method is that the data to be classified is so diverse that it resists the extraction of a common core or essence. The typologies produced by various scholars differ widely from one another, and how certain texts should be classified remains a perennial problem.<sup>77</sup> Proposed categories of Sethian, Valentinian, Hermetic and Thomasine Gnosticism have done little to settle the issue.

#### b. The Messina Definition

The 1966 Messina conference on the Origins of Gnosticism was a landmark in the study of Gnosticism in the post-Nag Hammadi era and provides a good example of the typological method.<sup>78</sup> It produced a consensus definition of Gnosticism in four parts: gnosis, gnosticism, pre-gnosticism, and proto-gnosticism.<sup>79</sup> *Gnosis* was "knowledge of divine mysteries reserved for an elite." *Gnosticism* was a second-century group of systems held together by a series of characteristics cohering around "the idea of a divine spark in man, deriving from the divine realm, fallen into this world of fate, birth and death, and

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75 Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon, 1963).

76 See Karen King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 11–13.

77 See Williams, *Rethinking*, 46–51.

78 Ugo Bianchi, ed., *Le origini dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina 13–18 Aprile 1966* (SHR 12. Leiden: Brill, 1967).

79 *Ibid.*, xxvi–xxvii.

needing to be awakened by the divine counterpart of the self in order to be finally reintegrated." *Pre-Gnosticism* included Jewish apocalypticism, Qumran, and certain elements of Christian theology which contained the "different themes and motifs constituting such a 'pre-' but not yet involving Gnosticism." *Proto-Gnosticism* should be used for cases where the "the essence of Gnosticism" was present prior to the second century. The Messina conference failed to solve the definitional debate, though, and in many cases merely led to further confusion, since there were now four terms about which to argue rather than one.

### c. Two Recent Contributions

Two recent contributions to the debate have gone so far as to propose doing away with the term "Gnosticism" altogether. The first, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, by Michael Williams, argues, as the title suggests, that the term "Gnosticism" is simply too broad and ambiguous to be helpful. For support he addresses several common misconceptions or caricatures about Gnosticism:

1) Gnostics engaged in "protest exegesis" that reversed the values of the OT in the name of deeper knowledge, thus portraying the serpent, Cain, or Balaam as good, while vilifying the Creator.<sup>80</sup> Williams disputes that such exegesis was actually engaged in "protest." He believes that the goal was instead to solve sticky exegetical problems with which both Jews and Christians had long wrestled, such as anthropomorphic language, textual contradictions, indications of plurality within the divine, and the suggestion that the OT God had limited knowledge. He also notes that the various gnostic texts are not at all uniform in their solutions.<sup>81</sup>

2) Gnosticism was not an independent entity, but essentially parasitic in the sense that it attached to a host religion and fed off of it.<sup>82</sup> Williams responds that this is a value judgment which cannot be established historically. Are not also Christianity and Islam in some sense parasites on Judaism? Perhaps, he suggests, it is better to

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80 Williams, *Rethinking*, 54–79.

81 "It is no longer possible to identify among these sources one distinctive method of interpretation or attitude toward Scripture" (*Ibid.*, 59).

82 *Ibid.*, 80–95.

understand Gnosticism as an innovation (like Islam and Christianity) that did not succeed in the long term (unlike Islam and Christianity).

3) Gnostics were anti-cosmos or “world-rejecters” because they believed the world was created by a lower god; therefore they remained apolitical and uninterested in the wider culture.<sup>83</sup> Williams rebuts this by demonstrating that in many cases Gnostics were actually more socially integrated and culturally influenced than “orthodox” Christians, and that they sometimes tended in their ethics to lessen the tension between them and the larger society.

4) *Gnostics fostered hatred of the body because it was the product of the archons, or cosmic rulers.*<sup>84</sup> Williams’s discussion demonstrates that in most cases gnostic views were more nuanced. Some Gnostics believed exactly the opposite because they viewed the body positively as the mirror of the divine, “the best *visible* trace of the divine in the material world.”<sup>85</sup>

5) *Gnostics were ascetic with regard to food and sexuality.*<sup>86</sup> Williams acknowledges that this is generally accurate, as Gnostics tended to view sexuality as the plot hatched by the demiurge in order to dilute the divine seed. Enough exceptions to this understanding exist, though, to urge caution in making sweeping statements.

6) *Gnostics were libertine.*<sup>87</sup> This stereotype arises from the lack of emphasis on charity in the Gnostics’ discussions of ethics, and the accusations of the heresiologists who wished to portray the Gnostics as immoral. In almost every case, though, the belief that Gnostics were libertine is based upon misinformation, faulty inference, or simply imagination run wild (one might recall that the “orthodox” themselves were often accused of engaging in drunken incestuous orgies, infant sacrifice, and cannibalism).<sup>88</sup> In fact, only one clear instance of libertine behavior is directly attested. Epiphanes, son of Carpocrates, appears to have advocated free love, but he did so not out of flagrant disregard for God’s law, but based on his belief in the goodness of creation—a very ungnostic view.<sup>89</sup>

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83 Ibid., 96–115

84 Ibid., 116–138.

85 Ibid., 117.

86 Ibid., 139–62.

87 Ibid., 163–88.

88 See Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 9.

89 Clement, *Strom.* 3.6.1–3.9.3, is the source for the description of Epiphanes.