Households of Faith (Jn 4:46–54; 11:1–44): A Metaphor for the Johannine Community

Mary Coloe

Abstract: This article proposes that the image of “the household of God” provides the best metaphor of the Johannine community. Within the text itself we are able to see traces of this community in the issue confronting the households at Capernaum and Bethany. The article draws on a previous study of the Temple as the “House of God” and the trasferal of this image to the community as the “Household” of God. Where the image of Temple is applied to Jesus in the Gospel narrative, the community is contrasted to the different households of Judea.

VARIOUS SCHOLARS HAVE ATTEMPTED TO describe particular characteristics of the community behind the Fourth Gospel. In 1975 Elaine Conklin wrote of “a Johannine Circle,”1 while in the same year Alan Culpepper published his doctoral thesis proposing that the community was modelled on the lines of ancient “schools.”2 This study proposes another model, arising from within the text itself, which may provide a glimpse of the self-conscious identity of the community, that is, how the Johannine community actually understood itself. I am not attempting here an analysis of the historical stages of the development of the community or the final text; other scholars have taken this approach.3 My aim is to see if the text reflects something of the actual self-identity of this community.

What we have in the Gospel is the theological reflection that emerged from a new living experience of God’s Spirit — what Sandra Schneiders terms “a spirituality”.4 This living spirituality wrestled with the christological and theological issues facing the early communities made up

While the term “house” or “household” is not mentioned in the above episodes, such a setting is implied by the context and also by the use of the term “dwelling” (παραμενείν; 1:38-39; 4:40) . The episodes where the terminology house/household is explicit reveal yet another dimension of the theological significance of this metaphor and the relevance for the Johannine community. I now turn to two of these episodes to explore them in greater detail.

THE HOUSEHOLDS OF CAPERNAUM AND BETHANY

The households of Bethany and Capernaum provide the setting for two miracles and for exploring a critical issue for the Johannine community, namely the presence/absence of Jesus. As miracle stories they exhibit similarities in structure, and both have the additional Johannine feature of an initial refusal or rebuke to the request for healing.

The Official’s Son at Capernaum (6:1-14)6

**Introduction:**
If at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill,

**Request:** 47 He begged him to come and heal his son,
for he was on the point of death.

**Refusal:** 48 Jesus therefore said to him,
“Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”

11. The term παραμενείν is frequently translated as “remain.” This raises the theological implications of the word, which suggests an intimate interpersonal relationship. I prefer to translate this word as “dwelling” or “abide.” For a recent discussion of the theological significance of this term see J. A. Lee, “Abiding in the Fourth Gospel: A Case-study in Feminist Biblical Theology,” Pacifica 10 (1997) 223-36.

12. Miracle stories have the following typical structure: (a) a problem described; (b) request made; (c) the miracle performed accompanied by a gesture, touch, word or mention of a name; (d) the successful accomplishment described; (e) a response of wonder on the part of onlookers. The recognition and naming of this five-fold pattern is based on the work of Bultman; for the wording, see F. J. Moloney, The Life of the Gospel (New York: Crossroad, 1988). See M. Labate, “Between Tradition and Literary Art: The Miracle Tradition in the Fourth Gospel,” Sibcy 41/1999 179-201.

By contrast, both Martha and Mary express limited faith in Jesus in their identical statements, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died" (vv 21, 32). Commentators vary in their interpretations of the faith implied in the statement in both instances. Schneider sees in Martha’s words, “I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God”, the highest expression of Johannine faith, the equivalent of the Petrine confession in Matt 16:16-19. However, as Moloney points out, these titles have all been applied to Jesus before (see 1:41, 49), Martha’s words do not directly reply to Jesus’ question about belief in him as “the resurrection and the life” (11:25), and they are also stated in the perfect tense, which expresses a previously-held belief rather than a new-found faith in response to Jesus’ immediate revelation.

For Moloney it is Mary not Martha who portrays full Johannine faith in her act of falling at Jesus’ feet, which Moloney interprets as an act of worship similar to that of the Blind Man (9:36). But here also I must disagree. Mary’s exact repetition of the words of her sister indicates no significant development or change in faith. Her act of falling at the feet of Jesus is not called an act of worship, as was the similar act of the Blind Man (9:36; spookelager; 11:32; προσεύχοντας ουδὲν λέγοντος). The action, accompanied by weeping, suggests grief rather than worship.

Mary’s act of faith at the feet of Jesus must wait until chapter 12. Even when Jesus gives his word, “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “take away the stone” (11:26), the stone remains within their previous conceptions of life after death and hesitates: “he has been dead four days” (9:39). Jesus’ words challenge them to leave their limited understanding of life - as something to be restored at the end of time in the resurrection from the dead - to believe in a gift of life prior to the "dead time.”

18. In describing the repetition of Martha’s words by Mary, Byrne (Laursen, 69-70) writes, “Mary echoes her sister’s word of restoration… The repetition, with its implication that the two sisters had extensively shared their disappointment, powerfully drives home to Jesus the Petrine confession: ‘Risen from the dead’ in the context of their understanding of the present day life.”


21. Moloney, Signs and Symbols, 166.

22. So Byrne, Laursen, 59.

23. According to rabbinic thought the soul hovered around the body for three days. Beyond this it was declared to be dead. The whole intensity of the resurrection begins at the third day. For three days the soul returns to the grave, meaning to return to the body; if it resists however, that the colour of the countenance has changed, then it goes” (Bib-S 2:544 citing Gen. Rab. 100:16a).
history, with implications both for those who have died and those still alive.

 Those who have died
 Those who believe and yet die
 will live (v. 25)
 will not die forever (v. 26)

 In these statements Jesus brings traditional end-time expectations into the present. The dead will not remain in death until some future time; they are promised life beyond death. For those who are alive and who will experience physical death, this death too will not be death forever. Time distinctions blur, as the narrative has already indicated in v. 2 with its prophetic description of Mary as the one who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair (11:2), an action that will be described in the following chapter (12:1-3). Future events impinge upon the present.

 The official, acting in faith on the words of Jesus, "your son lives," is met on his return journey and given precisely that information (4:51). The words of Jesus are exactly confirmed and in response, even without seeing Jesus, the household becomes a household of faith. The experience of his healing word, even from a distance, is enough. Similarly, in response to Jesus' command, Lazarus emerges from the tomb wearing the trappings of death which have no power to bind him (11:43-44). But this miracle leads to schism, with some of "the Jews" believing while others go to plot with the Pharisees (11:45).

 THE HOUSEHOLD AS AN IMAGE OF THE JOHANNINE COMMUNITY

 In both households, that at Capernaum and that at Bethany, there is initially a concern that Jesus come to the household; only his presence, it seems, can guarantee life. In this respect both miracles speak to the experience of the post-Easter Christian community which no longer has the physical presence of Jesus; his absence poses a threat to faith. Like Thomas (20:25), the royal official and the sisters of Lazarus seek physical assurance. The sisters’ heart-rending cry, "Lord if you had been here, ...", will find an echo in the cry of many disciples across the centuries. In the face of this anguish, the Cana miracle affirms the central message of these early chapters that the word of Jesus is trustworthy. The believer can rely on Jesus’ word and there is no need to see signs and wonders – no need even to have his physical presence; the word given by Jesus is sufficient.

 While we do not see the actual household at Capernaum, we do note that the royal official is changed through his encounter with Jesus. The

24. It has become customary to use the term "the Jews" in this manner (within quotation marks) to show that the term is not to be understood as a description of historical persons belonging to the religion of Second Temple Judaism in the first century C.E. Within the narrative of the Fourth Gospel the phrase denotes characters within the text who function as the opponents of Jesus for a polemical purpose.

25. This article, with its focus on John 4 and 11, is part of a larger study of households across the Gospel. An analysis of John 12 (1-8) must await discussion as part of that project.

reader is introduced to him in terms of his role as a courtier (πριγγέω, 4:46). Persons in such a position are used to having their wishes carried out; their word is usually effective. Jesus’ rebuke, then, must come as a shock to one in such a position of authority. Jesus will not do the wondrous things normally expected of a miracle worker. There will be no incantations, no special potions, no obscure gestures. When, following the rebuke, the official speaks again with a polite form of address, "Sir" (v. 49), he is shifting from his position as one with authority over another, to one recognizing the authority of the other. Jesus responds with his word, "Go, your son lives" (v. 50). The courtier is now simply called a human being, (ἐνθαμμωμένος, v. 50); he has been stripped of the trappings of royal status and now shares the experience of all humanity before the authoritative Jesus. When he returns to his household, the emphasis is now on his relationship with his child; he is called "father" (ἐγγείροντος, v. 53). His identity within the household is now to be found in terms of relationships rather than his official status. In the household of faith such positions of authority have no weight since the only authoritative presence is the word of Jesus. A child in this household of faith has found life, and a father has found his humanity.

 While there is no final expression of faith on the part of Martha and Mary in chapter 11, there are some characters whose faith undergoes change through this event. Among "the Jews" there is a division, with some believing in Jesus and others going to the Pharisees (11:45-46). The ones who believe are "the Jews" who had gone to Mary and who are described as being with her in the house (ἐν τῇ ἐναι, 11:31). Like the household of the royal official at Capernaum, the ones associated with the household of Bethany also come to faith in response to Jesus’ miraculous deed. Both miracles conclude with faith being found by those who share in the household. The story of the household of faith at Bethany will continue in the next chapter (12:1-11).
life. Although Jesus is about to die, the Lazarus story witnesses to the truth that life continues beyond death (see vv 25-26) and, through his death, Jesus passes into that time beyond death where he can gather into one the scattered children of God (1:12).

This is the first time in the narrative that the expression "children of God" appears. The Prologue promised that those who believed in Jesus would be given the power to become children of God (1:12), while "the Jews" have claimed to be "children of Abraham" (8:39). The filiation that Jesus will offer through his death far surpasses the latter claim. Believers will be gathered as children of God's household. Jesus' death will be precreative, bearing children in a post-resurrection household of faith.

Lazarus' death thrusts the household of Bethany into a struggle towards full faith in Jesus. This household and "the Jews" who join with Mary need to experience Lazarus' return to life before they can truly believe. So it is with the household of disciples. They, like Martha, Mary and "the Jews" who share the household's grief, must experience the resurrection before faith is possible (see 20:8). In the post-Easter time of the Johannine community, although Jesus is absent to sight, he lives on and his work of gathering the scattered children into one will continue in the missionary work of the disciples. Trusting in the efficacious word of Jesus, the household of faith can believe that death, both the death of Jesus and death in the latter community of believers, does not annul life.

CONCLUSION

I began by proposing that "household" provides the best living metaphor of the Johannine community. In their lived experience of Jesus' abiding presence with them, mediated through the Spirit, community members perceived themselves as the locus of God's dwelling. Where once the physical body of Jesus could be called the Temple or House of God because of his unique relationship with the Father (1:1, 18; 2:10, 19, 21), in the post-Easter period believers also experienced the indwelling presence of Father, Spirit and Jesus (14:10, 27, 23, 25). They came to understand themselves as the raised up Temple of Israel's eschatological hope. This new Temple, though, is conceived primarily in terms of relationship to God rather than a place of cultic sacrifice. In becoming part of Jesus' family at the feast (19:25-30) and as being shown into his Father's household (see 20:17b), the community of believers becomes the dwelling place of God. Because such a self-understanding is a presupposition of the community, its "taken for granted" status means it is

---

26. For further treatment of the claim to be children of Abraham, see M. Colos, "Like Father, Like Son: The Role of Abraham in Tobit" (1987), Pacifica 12 (1998) 1-11; see esp. pp. 3-7, 10.

not obvious to readers who have lost touch with the initial experience that was theirs. It is a transparent image that would only be obvious to those with insiders' knowledge and experience.

In selecting two "household" episodes I have offered an insider's reading of the text, making explicit the issues that reach behind the narrative into the spirituality of the Johannine community from which the Fourth Gospel emerged. Though they now thought of themselves as making up the Household of God, members of the community also knew themselves to be not immune from the pain of illness and death. Characters in the narrative such as the royal official and the sisters Martha and Mary depict faith's vulnerability in moments of human anguish. They have faith, of a sort, but their faith, put to the test by the onset of death, falters. They long for the physical presence of Jesus. The miracles in each case affirm that Jesus' word is sufficient and trustworthy. At Cana the word alone brings healing; at Bethany it reaches into the dark tomb of death to call Lazarus to life. While no longer sharing the privileged experience of the first disciples, future households of Christians are invited to believe that even grave illness and death are open to the power of Jesus' word.

27. As well as offering an insight into the community's spirituality, appreciation of its perception of itself as the Household of God has major implications for the understanding of Johannine eschatology. Such an eschatology will draw on household practices rather than cult and will find new ways of relating to others and to God. A full development of the ecclesial implications of the Household image is well beyond the possibilities of a short article. I propose to pursue the theme further in a later publication.