

Christopher A. Porter
Johannine Social Identity Formation
after the Fall of the Jerusalem Temple:
Negotiating Identity in Crisis
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WALLY V. CIRAFESI
wvciraf@gmail.com
Lund University, 221 00 Lund, Sweden

This book is a revised version of Christopher Porter's Ph.D. dissertation at Ridley College, Melbourne. His main goal is to read the Gospel and Epistles of John through the lens of social identity theory as a way of drawing out the authors' (or author's) intent to renegotiate cultic life without the Jerusalem temple. The book's central argument is that the historical contexts of Judaism after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE "provided a distinct impetus for the social category formation and arguments of the Fourth Gospel and subsequently the Johannine Epistles" (4). This impetus "drove intra-subgroup differentiation, through the Gospel and Epistles, to form a novel Jewish Christ-follower social category after the removal of the possibility of temple-based cultic activity." It is within the context of such processes of intra-subgroup differentiation that the Gospel author's characterization of the *Ioudaioi*, the ἀποσυνάγωγος passages, and its harsh polemic should be understood. Porter says the *Ioudaioi* are the Gospel's perceived "out-group"; he uses the Greek term Ἰουδαῖοι distinctively to refer to what the Gospel similarly perceives as the "superordinate group" (142–43).

The book has eight chapters and includes a glossary among the front matter for readers not particularly fluent in social identity theory. Porter, in chapters 1–2, sets the stage nicely for the heart of the study, which comes in chapters 3–6. He offers in chapter 1 a helpful discussion of past work on John's Gospel using what Porter calls "implicit sociological approaches" (5). Here he includes the scholarship of J.L. Martyn, Wayne Meeks, R. Alan Culpepper, and Raymond Brown, each of whom, Porter says, employed an "implicitly separatist sociological model" to understand the social context to which John supposedly bears witness. Critics of this model are discussed (Martin Hengel, Adele Reinhartz, Richard Bauckham, Edward Klink, Jonathan Bernier, and David Lamb), and then Porter turns to a very brief—perhaps too brief—presentation of scholars who, like him, have proposed that the

temple's destruction in 70 CE somehow impacted the Fourth Gospel's composition, whether sociologically or christologically. However, the important work of Norwegian scholar Kåre Sigvald Fuglseth (*Johannine Sectarianism in Perspective* [Brill 2005]) was either left out or missed by Porter. Although Fuglseth did not use the same socio-cognitive social identity theory as Porter, he did develop a sociological model to study social relationships and the Johannine temple theme, using similar comparative textual material as well (e.g., Qumran, Philo). One would have expected some interaction with Fuglseth's book.

After building in the remainder of chapter 1 a sophisticated model of social category formation within the framework of Stephen Reicher's and Fabio Sani's "Structured Analysis of Group Arguments" (SAGA), Porter attempts, in chapter 2, to test the model against the Damascus Document (CD) and the Rule of the Community (1QS). These documents, for Porter, represent "control groups" (earlier referred to as "control documents" [4]), apparently because they are two examples of relatively well-known "temple-removed Jewish social construction" (42). One will not find here very deep engagement with Qumran scholarship on various historical-critical issues, but that is not Porter's aim. What Porter is after in this chapter is exposing and comparing strategies of group differentiation in these documents by applying his SAGA model. Porter concludes that, while CD "presents a strongly apologetic narrative to promote the in-group social identity to the superordinate group" (58), the 1QS "presents an inwardly focused approach, only addressing the members of the in-group and any theoretical members joining the group" (73).

Chapter 3 has a short introduction that functions as a segue into Porter's analysis of Johannine material in the next three chapters. Porter addresses traditional issues in Johannine interpretation, such as orality, authorship, date, and audience, all reoriented toward Porter's social identity framework.

Chapters 4–6 are the most important parts of the book, with Porter in chapters 4 and 5 impressively covering nearly the entirety of John's Gospel and in chapter 6 dealing with the Johannine Epistles. In chapter 4, Porter performs a series of ten SAGA analyses, aiming to highlight the way the Gospel constructs "Christological social identity confrontation" through its narratives of conflict. For example, in his analysis of John 2:12–25, Porter suggests that the scene functions within a "Type A" argumentative structure (94), meaning that it "involves an appeal to a positive view of the superordinate group, along with a consonantly positive in-group argument, and a dissonantly negative out-group argument" (32). Within a SAGA framework, Jesus' clearing of the temple episode does five things: 1) it "presents a positive superordinate group identity assessment in the cultic function of the temple"; 2) it gives a contrast with the "negative out-group activities that act as a negation of the superordinate group identity – presented here as a dissonant argument about out-group practice"; 3) "Jesus's own act of clearing the temple, and the remembered justification for the actions, present a positive in-group argument that is consonant with the superordinate group functions"; 4) the argument concludes with the "ambiguous presentation of the possible future social identity presented in the people who saw the signs but were excluded from fellowship with Jesus"; and 5) the scene "brings the historical frame of the superordinate group, and the identity

construction associated with the temple, into contrast with the present context of the post-Jerusalem War reality for an audience wrestling with the loss of a significant identity construct” (94–95). Porter proceeds to conduct similar SAGA construction analyses for passages from John 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 18, and 19. Using this approach, Porter argues that the Johannine author seek to “define an identity for the in-group [Christ-followers], but not as one separated from the parent group. Rather, this non-sectarian model of identity formation seeks to define the in-group identity as the redefinition or recapitulation of the superordinate group [*Ἰουδαῖοι*] while simultaneously seeking to exclude the out-group [*Ioudaioi*] from the superordinate group” (148).

In chapter 5, devoted to the topic of christological social identity confirmation (rather than confrontation), Porter specifically analyzes what he calls “in-group-specific scenes” (149). These include passages from John 8, 9, 13, 14, 15–16, 17, 20, and 21. According to Porter, these in-group scenes focus on identity formation within the group, with the goal of reinforcing “normative identity” for the in-group rather than comparing how the in-group “fits” within the superordinate group. Thus, in these sections Jesus is presented as “not only prototypical for the in-group but also as cogent with the prototypicality of the superordinate group, and even the superordinate group prototype YHWH through the ἐγώ εἰμι statements,” which, as a result, tie Johannine Christ-followers with the Ἰουδαῖοι (not the *Ioudaioi*) through “normative prototypicality” (196). Porter argues that this type of identity construction establishes “a significant overlap between in-group and superordinate group and consistently portrays the in-group as the ‘true members’ and ‘true representatives’ of the superordinate group.” Porter concludes this chapter by suggesting that these sections of John’s Gospel demonstrate many socio-rhetorical parallels to the strategies of identity construction found in CD, as both documents “continually present identity construction in conversation with a parent—superordinate—group and engage in relativised constructions with relation to that group” (196).

In chapter 6, Porter turns his social category model to the Johannine Epistles. His conclusion regarding 1 John is that it displays a “different character” than that of John’s Gospel (216). The reason for this is that whereas the Gospel is primarily focused on “inter-group interaction,” 1 John is fundamentally concerned with “in-group discourse” and only minimally concerned with describing the out-group. This focus on in-groupness, in Porter’s view, is quite similar to the argumentative methodology employed by 1QS. Porter makes similar observations regarding 2 and 3 John. He suggests that the in-group identity in 2 John bases its constructs on a knowledge of the Fourth Gospel “as a shared schematic narrative” and is presented as being distanced from any known out-group (222). However, the fixed character of the bounds of the in-group in 2 John contrast with the Gospel’s “porosity of group boundaries” which is displayed by its focus on inter-group interaction. Third John is similarly an “inwardly looking group,” which is also “reliant upon the memory of, and engagement with, identity constructs initiated in the Fourth Gospel for their self-categorisation” (228). Porter concludes this chapter suggesting that his social category analysis might help us to rethink traditional questions about the so-called “Johannine Community.” On the one hand, he suggests that the forms of

social identity construction found in John's Gospel are not aimed at reinforcing the identity of an existing group, meaning that "the Evangelist may not be writing to a distinct existing community but rather one that is prospective in nature" (232). On the other hand, while the social identity constructions found in the inwardly focused Johannine Epistles still do not necessarily indicate that they were "totally cut off from external engagement," it is likely that they do represent at least some variant of an existing community that was only anticipated by the Gospel of John (234). Therefore, Porter concludes, "If there is a Johannine community to be found, it is within the Epistles as the outcome of the proleptic identity formation of the Gospel" (235).

In chapter 7, Porter attempts to add more comparative source material to his study, this time focusing on Jewish writers (mainly Philo and Josephus) who, in his view, competitively construct their own visions of "orthodox" (his term) Jewish identity in contexts where a "significant tenet of identity formation has been removed" (237). Porter's goal in this chapter is to establish the notion that, with the loss of the Jerusalem temple, Jewish authors competed over how to define Jewish identity afresh, and that John's Gospel should be seen as participating in this competitive conversation. The chapter is short and a bit superficial in its analyses. For example, the fact that, in contrast to Josephus and John, Philo wrote about Jerusalem and the temple as a diaspora Jew in the *pre-70* period, when the temple was still standing, is not meaningfully accounted for in Porter's analysis. Yet Porter rightly highlights the point, as many other scholars have, that Philo is, in general, helpful for thinking about the ways that Jews, including the author of John's Gospel, dealt with life situations in which the Jerusalem temple cult was not a daily reality.

In conclusion, this book makes a solid contribution to an important topic in Johannine studies as well as to the general application of social identity theories to the New Testament. Although its theoretical and methodological aspects make the book demanding on readers, its results show how useful these aspects can be. While readers should not look to this book for substantially new historical insights into Jewish antiquity, they will find plenty of insights into the mechanics of Johannine identity construction within the context of first-century Judaism. As such, the book has the potential to be an impactful addition to the currently growing number of *intra muros* readings of the Gospel of John.