

Ambiguity Among the Pharisees in John: The Characterization of the Pharisees in the Fourth Gospel

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In the Gospels, Pharisees are often viewed as the enemies of Jesus, foils to his message and ministry. Yet the temptation to ascribe to all Pharisees negative traits is unfair not only because it stereotypes a historical group, but also because it does not represent the author's original intent in John's Gospel. Examinations of the Gospel of John have sometimes overlooked the intricacies of the Pharisees by folding them into the larger group of "the Jews" without consideration of how they function in the narrative. The Pharisees are a complex group in John who often function separate from, and perhaps even against, "the Jews." By looking at the Johannine references to this group, John is evidently doing something different from the Synoptics' approach to the Pharisees. Their characterization in the narrative is ambiguous rather than static, demonstrating an unappreciated aspect of the author's ideology.

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Introduction

The Pharisees are often viewed as the enemies of Jesus in the Gospels, or at least foils to his message and ministry. Yet the temptation to ascribe to the whole of Pharisees negative traits is unfair not only because it stereotypes a historical group, but also because it does not represent the author's original intent in John's Gospel. Examinations of the Gospel of John have sometimes overlooked the intricacies of the Pharisees by folding them into the larger group of "the Jews" without much consideration of how they function in the narrative individually. However, I propose that the Pharisees are a complex group in John who often function separate from, and perhaps even against, "the Jews." By looking at the Johannine references to this group, John is evidently doing something different from the Synoptics' approach to the Pharisees. Their characterization in the narrative, I argue, is ambiguous, rather than static, demonstrating an unappreciated aspect of the author's ideology.

The consequence of ambiguity present within the Pharisee group would suggest the Gospel author is not crafting a dualistic "black and white" story with the Pharisees as

the *de facto* villains, representing hostility toward Jesus.¹ The story is more complicated than this. How the Pharisees respond to Jesus—namely the division among them about the subject of Jesus—reveals that the group can't be neatly categorized with any single trait. The present exploration demonstrates that the presence of both helpful and hostile traits among the Pharisees might lead to a different characterization. While the intention is mainly to show the ambiguity and defend the Pharisees from unfair stereotypes, in this article's conclusion I will also suggest that their lack of unity as a group might suggest a strong message about the continuum of faith in John.

To investigate the Pharisees' characterization, I am utilizing point of view criticism, such as that presented by Gary Yamasaki,² as well as characterization in literary criticism, especially the works of Cornelius Bennema.³ To discover a character's ideological point of view, Yamasaki describes three clues: narration of characters' internal views, direct discourse of characters, and actions performed by the characters.⁴ Most often the narrator of John does not directly characterize people, only a few times "going into their heads." Most characterization occurs with speech and actions.⁵ Since the author centers Jesus as the main character in the narrative (Jesus represents the author's ideological view) and 20:31 outlines the purpose of the book as believing in Jesus, it is logical to view all characters in relation to how they respond and interact with Jesus, showing their individual ideological viewpoint.⁶ Conversely, the author's ideology reveals itself when the ideology of the characters clash (or conform) with Jesus.

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 130-31; Raymond E. Brown and Francis J. Moloney, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 166-67; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary*, trans. Rupert William Noel Hoare and John Kenneth Riches (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 86. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

² See Gary Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative: Point of View in Biblical Exegesis* (London: T & T Clark, 2007).

³ See Cornelius Bennema, "A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature," *Biblical Interpretation* 17, no. 4 (July 2009): 375-421; Cornelius Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character in the Gospel of John," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W Skinner, Library of New Testament Studies 461 (New York: T&T Clark, 2013), 36-58; Cornelius Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 41.

⁴ Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative*, 177-80.

⁵ Unfortunately, these two factors are decidedly less clear methods, compared to internal voice and narration, of determining the narrative stance, in my opinion. Cf. Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach," 43.

⁶ Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach," 51-55. Cf. Gary Yamasaki, *Perspective Criticism: Point of View and Evaluative Guidance in Biblical Narrative* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 99-102.

The Pharisees Among “the Jews”

There is no shortage of debate on the identity of the enigmatic group known in John as οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, frequently glossed as “the Jews.”⁷ Though it is beyond the scope of this work, a few comments are in order. Much of the issue surrounding “the Jews” is that the references aren’t consistent. In John, there are multiple examples of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι apparently referring to those who are a part of the wider Jewish ethno-religious identity,⁸ yet there are other examples where they are likely specifically those in positions of power, influence, or authority.⁹ The author appears to typically employ οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι to refer to the amorphous group of Jews who “have in common a religious rejection of Jesus as God’s unique Son.”¹⁰ The heterogeneous nature of “the Jews” is important to this study, as I argue we should regard the Pharisees in a similar way.

The Pharisees, like other named groups within Judaism, appear to act as a subset of those οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι who are in power. John uses three terms for Jewish religious authorities: “Pharisees,” “chief priests,” and “rulers.”¹¹ These three terms fit into the broader category of “the Jews” at times, but each have their own distinct nuances.¹² None

⁷ I will typically refer to the group as “the Jews,” though I recognize that this is a poor translation. It’s certainly not the literal one, since that would be “Judeans.” For a comprehensive survey, see Ruben Zimmermann, “‘The Jews’: Unreliable Figures or Unreliable Narration?” in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. François Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), 71-78.

⁸ For instance, in 6:41, 52; 7:15, 35; 8:22, 31; and 10:19, “the Jews” probably references the wider population and not just authorities. Cf. Marianne M. Thompson, *John*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 201-2; Brown and Maloney, 165.

⁹ Urban C. von Wahlde comments that the term “the Jews” is used interchangeably with religious authorities in four passages in John (1:19-24; 7:32-36; 9:13-41; and 18:3-14), ethnically Jewish people are said to “fear the Jews” showing they can be different from the larger populace, and “the Jews” have the power and influence to excommunicate those that believe in Jesus, as recorded in John 9. It is when the Jews are referenced with those qualities that the text is referring to religious authorities, though it’s unclear what kind of body the author imagines. Von Wahlde takes almost every instance of “the Jews” as meaning the authorities. I am more conservative in designating which reference is to Jewish authorities. Urban C. von Wahlde, “The Terms for Religious Authorities in the Fourth Gospel: A Key to Literary-Strata,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98, no. 2 (June 1979): 234.

¹⁰ Brown and Maloney, 166.

¹¹ The term “scribes” is used in conjunction with Pharisees in 8:3, from the “Woman Caught in Adultery” narrative that is not considered an authentic part of John as it is not part of the oldest manuscripts of John. This is the only usage in John, however, and considering it is likely that 7:53 to 8:11 is foreign to the original text, “scribes” is not included in the analysis.

¹² For example, different terms are used to reference what appears to be the same actions in 1:19-24; 7:32-36; and 9:13-41. Von Wahlde, “The Terms for Religious Authorities,” 234-35. See also Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 41; Uta Poplutz, “Pharisees: A House Divided,” in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. François Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), 116.

of these terms are used in the same sentence as “the Jews.” Interestingly, “Pharisees” occur with “rulers” and with “chief priests” but the combination of “rulers and chief priests” isn’t found in the Gospel.¹³ That Pharisees and other groups get their own unique identities and voices in certain parts and other times are combined into a broader category is certainly puzzling. Citing specifically the interchangeability between “the (non-specific) Jews” in 1:19 and the Pharisees in 2:24, Uta Poplutz insightfully mentions that “it seems that the narrator is not interested in an accurate differentiation. This significantly hinders a thorough characterization of the Pharisees.”¹⁴ However, I believe the narrator is *sometimes* interested in a differentiation. The point remains: it is hard to tell what the author is trying to do with this group.

There are four specific instances (1:19-24; 7:31-36; 8:12-22; and 9:13-41) in John where in the course of a narrative unit it appears “the Jews” and “Pharisees” are used indiscriminately. Much of the interplay between the terms will come up again later when the specific sections are discussed, but a few notes bear mentioning. Firstly, the Pharisees are clearly a subgroup within “the Jews,” so seeing them as interchangeable (which is probably unavoidable in 1:19-24¹⁵) does not go against my treating the Pharisees separately. The central question is about *why* sometimes the vocabulary of the Pharisees is employed, and when this term is used *how* the Pharisees are characterized. These questions guide this paper.

The choice to use “the Jews” or “Pharisees” in any given scene has spawned a few different interpretations. James Louis Martyn sees in his two-level reading references to the author’s time period: “the Jews” referring to the Jamnia Academy, and the “Pharisees” representing the local councils.¹⁶ The different terms may also be explained by different redactional levels, as von Wahlde and John Ashton believe.¹⁷ No matter what explanation is correct, it is important that these scholars are noticing that the author does something different when he uses “Pharisees” as opposed to “the Jews.” I observe in the body of this

¹³ Personally, I suggest the ruling status of chief priests is assumed, but not every Pharisee is on the Sanhedrin and has legal power. Cf. von Wahlde, “The Terms for Religious Authorities,” 239; Cornelis Bennema, “The Identity and Composition of ΟΙ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ in the Gospel of John,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 60, no. 2 (2009).

¹⁴ Poplutz, “Pharisees,” 177.

¹⁵ The text first says the Jews send the interrogators (v.19), then later says the Pharisees had sent them (v.24). It’s certainly strange that the narrator added v. 24 as a reminder of who sent them, especially because the sending party is changed. *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁶ James Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed., New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 65.

¹⁷ In the four instances (1:19-24; 7:31-36; 8:12-22; and 9:13-41) where the terms “Pharisee” and “Jew” seem to be interchangeable in the scene, von Wahlde notes an “awkwardness” in the narrative transition between the two terms that to him suggests different authors. Von Wahlde, “The Terms for Religious Authorities,” 239; John Ashton, “The Identity and Function of the Ioudaioi in the Fourth Gospel,” *Novum Testamentum* 27, no. 1 (January 1985): 61-2.

essay that the narrator assesses the Pharisees and the Jews at times differently, and the characterization of the Pharisees is much more complex than the Jewish religious authorities. I thus believe it is very important that interpreters not be quick to group the Pharisees with “the Jews” as always having the same personalities, the same mission, and always being interchangeable.

Appearing more than any of the other sub-groups among the Jewish authorities in the Gospel of John, the Pharisees are mentioned nineteen times, compared with six times for the chief priests and four for the rulers.¹⁸ They are certainly significant in the life of Jesus, as the Pharisees are not only one of the largest recognizable groups in this Gospel but they also feature prominently in the Synoptics. While historically Pharisees may have lacked formal power in Judea or Judaism, John does assign them the power to excommunicate from the synagogue in 12:42, identifying them as a group to be feared. Their importance is later downplayed in the Gospel, though, by their absence from the Passion narrative, and the last reference to them as active characters is in chapter 12.¹⁹ They may be powerful, but it’s the chief priests and the more general οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι who are actually responsible for Jesus’ death and drive the plot in the latter half of the Gospel.²⁰

Likely, some of the Pharisees had legal authority from being members of the Sanhedrin, a court of priests and lay people gathered by the High Priest. As Bennema notes, a meeting of the chief priests and Pharisees is specifically called συνέδριον in 11:47 and is likely a reference to the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin, because the meeting takes place in Jerusalem.²¹ So because Nicodemus is identified as both a Pharisee and a

¹⁸ Compare to “the Jews,” which is mentioned 70 or 71 times, depending on how you gloss 4:9b. Von Wahlde, “The Terms for Religious Authorities,” 233. [note 9].

¹⁹ Though 18:3 does mention the Pharisees, here they are only “owners,” along with the chief priests, of the police. While in 11:57 the chief priests and the Pharisees wanted to know where Jesus was to arrest him, the Pharisees are not active or present in the arrest or trial of Jesus in the Passion narrative. Cf. Ashton, “The Identity and Function,” 64. Poplutz, “Pharisees,” 122.

²⁰ Poplutz notes that the Pharisees are involved in religious debates, but the real seat of power is with the chief priests. Poplutz, “Pharisees,” 122. See also Bennema, “The Identity and Composition,” 248. Cf. John 18:28-31, 35; 19:6-7, 15.

²¹ The Greek word συνέδριον can refer to any council, but due to its association with Jerusalem, it’s probably the highest court of the Jews. Bennema, “The Identity and Composition,” 248. Bauckham asserts that some aristocratic Pharisees and the chief priests did make up some sort of ruling body over the Jews, based on evidence from Josephus. Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 162-3. Martyn admits that “the chief priests and the Pharisees” is an odd phrase to use, but that it certainly refers to the Sanhedrin. He supposes this is a way the author is reflecting the time of Jesus, when the chief priests were in power, and his current time, when the Pharisees were in power. Martyn, *History and Theology*, 86. Cf. Thompson, *John*, 253; Josephus, *Vita*, 21.

ἀρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων (ruler of the Jews)²² in 3:1 and later appears at a meeting of the chief priests and Pharisees in 7:45-52, it could be inferred he is a member of the Sanhedrin. Additionally, historically some priests were members of the Pharisee party,²³ which could mean the term “Pharisee” may at times include priests with authority. Since priests and lay nobles made up the Jewish high court, referring to “the Pharisees” (on occasions where they make decisions or send a group) could be a shortcut to referring to rulings made from the Sanhedrin. Probably, all the Pharisees who encounter Jesus in John are notable Pharisees, perhaps specifically as Sanhedrin members or as those enmeshed in politics in some way, rather than being simple lay practitioners of Pharisaic customs. Regardless of how much power they had within the Sanhedrin, their power via influence is historically likely, as even Josephus notes that the small group of Pharisees were generally supported and had the most influential school in the whole region.²⁴

Ambiguity and Lack of Hostility in the Pharisees

R. Alan Culpepper sees the minor characters in John being “flat” and having a single trait that defines them.²⁵ Poplutz also mentions that group characters are often presented in ancient literature as types with only a few defining qualities.²⁶ Culpepper specifically characterizes the Jews as representatives of unbelief and the Pharisees as representatives of hostility toward Jesus.²⁷ The Pharisees and their main representative character Nicodemus, however, are not simply flat with one defining characteristic.²⁸ Complexities and ambiguity, rather than simple stereotypes, abound in the Pharisees. The group is not homogeneous in their views or in their interactions with Jesus—meaning they don’t fit neatly as a single, uniform type. Ambiguity is observed from some major

²² Cf. Bauckham notes that Josephus uses the same term “ruler” to distinguish the elite from those on the council, though he admits elites were probably also included in the Sanhedrin. Bauckham, *Beloved Disciple*, 162.

²³ Martyn, *History and Theology*, 86. Cf. Josephus, *Vita*, 21.

²⁴ Josephus, *Antiq.*, 13:298; 18:15-20; *JW*, 2:162, 411.

²⁵ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 102. Cf. E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1954), 103-18.

²⁶ Though later he recognizes in his essay that the Pharisees are not a homogeneous group. Cf. Poplutz, “Pharisees,” 119, 124.

²⁷ Interestingly, he seems to see them functioning differently, though he can use them interchangeably. Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 125-31. This is much in line with several scholars doing work on John. See Colleen Conway, “Speaking Through Ambiguity: Minor Characters In The Fourth Gospel,” *Biblical Interpretation* 10, no. 3 (2002): 326-28.

²⁸ There is more and more research that suggests the characters in John are complex and even ambiguous, so not all agree with Culpepper’s conclusions. Cf. Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*; Susan Hylan, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Conway, “Speaking Through Ambiguity”; Jouette Bassler, “Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 108 (1989).

pieces of evidence that emerge from a close reading of the text: the Pharisees are not always hostile or negative; the sect earns a named character who shows character development toward believing; and the group sometimes lacks unity in opinions.

A major issue in interpreting the Pharisees is an inclination to assign motives to their actions when that may be inappropriate in the text. To be fair, in the Synoptic Gospels the image of the Pharisees is overwhelmingly negative: they are often wanting to “trap” Jesus, and he rebukes them for their actions.²⁹ However, in John we don’t see the same type of events, especially when the interpreter does not assume that every mention of “the Jews” automatically assumes the Pharisees in the text. There are also historical considerations regarding the Pharisees: since the author claims to be writing a non-fiction account, it’s reasonable to view, through the author’s perspective, that these characters and groups are thus “real.” We know from observation that for characters and groups to be “real” they are not monolithic but complex.³⁰

In an examination of every instance where Pharisees are active participants in the narrative or their presence raises important questions to consider, there is considerable ambiguity. Ignoring the minor references that mention the Pharisees only by name, as in 1:24, 4:1, and 18:3,³¹ the rest of the occurrences contribute to their complexity. The Pharisees are not a “fixed type” group—they have noticeable dynamics. This ambiguity makes it difficult to discern their exact function in the text. However, at the end of the work I’ll offer preliminary conclusions and suggestions for future research.

Nicodemus (3:1-15; 7:48-52; 19:38-40)

The most notable Pharisee in John—the only named one—is Nicodemus, and there is no clear scholarly consensus on his characterization in the text.³² Nicodemus first appears early in John’s Gospel coming to Jesus at night to ask questions. The narrator says in 3:1 he is apparently a very significant Pharisee, being a ruler³³ of the Jews and a “teacher of Israel” (3:10). Yet it’s striking that he comes alone, seemingly by his own volition, breaking with a stereotype of Pharisees who don’t personally engage with Jesus

²⁹ Yet they are not always portrayed negatively, as in Luke 13:31-33. See Donald E. Cook, “A Gospel Portrait of the Pharisees,” *Review & Expositor* 84, no. 2 (Spr 1987): 222-31.

³⁰ As argued by Bennema, “A Comprehensive Approach,” 43-6. See Bennema, “A Theory of Character,” 399-408.

³¹ I chose not to cover these three references in the body of this article because of their inconsequence to the narrative. None of these are “point of view” passages—they refer back to the Pharisees, but they do not put the reader “in the room” with them.

³² For a list of several different opinions on Nicodemus, see Conway, “Speaking Through Ambiguity,” 329.

³³ A term which Martyn views as John’s “shorthand” for identifying someone as a secret believer among the ruling class, probably the Sanhedrin. Martyn, *History and Theology*, 88.

in lengthy conversations.³⁴ In his conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus rightly recognizes that Jesus is a teacher from God, but it doesn't take long for Nicodemus to turn into a classic Johannine foil so Jesus can explain the correct way of thinking.³⁵ Culpepper notes how Nicodemus' character plays into developing John's theme:

The conversation with Nicodemus offers the implied author a chance to introduce the difficulty of being born anew and receiving the life Jesus offers. To this point the reader may have assumed it is as simple as the calling of the first disciples in the first chapter. Nicodemus steps forward as one for whom the revelation is not clear and the birth pangs are very real.³⁶

Nicodemus thus is present as a person who is challenged by the call of Jesus. Even a person of learning and authority, a teacher and Pharisee, has difficulty coming to Jesus.

Though Nicodemus shows that even those highly educated may have difficulty understanding "earthly things," he may redeem himself as an advocate for Jesus later. In chapter 7:50, Nicodemus (who the narrator reminds us went to Jesus before) seems to defend Jesus in public, though without giving away personal allegiance, if any.³⁷ If you take him as a secret believer, even though the text never specifies this his presence in the scene creates irony in the Pharisees' rhetorical question about any of them believing in Jesus.³⁸ Surely, the harsh response from the other Pharisees in 7:52 shows that the group thought Nicodemus was showing some sort of loyalty to Jesus.

Finally, at the end of his arc (19:39), Nicodemus (with another reminder that he once went to Jesus at night), shows he at least thinks highly of Jesus by burying Jesus with fine spices. While Nicodemus' narrative arc never results in him explicitly identifying

³⁴ Bauckham suggests it is likely that Nicodemus brought his disciples for the lengthy discussion, and the narrator assumed the audience would understand this. That could very well be true from a historical standpoint, but I think the fact that only Nicodemus is mentioned is narratively important—it singles him out from among his group. Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 165. Cf. Poplutz, "Pharisees," 123.

³⁵ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 135. See also Marinus de Jonge, "Nicodemus and Jesus: Some Observations on Misunderstanding and Understanding in the Fourth Gospel," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 53, no. 2 (1971): 345.

³⁶ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Weave of the Tapestry: Character and Theme in John," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W Skinner, Library of New Testament Studies 461 (New York: T&T Clark, 2013), 26.

³⁷ Marinus de Jonge thinks that Nicodemus' concern is for the legal aspects of the trial. I think the fact that Nicodemus, a named character, is offering a dissenting opinion, and the text reminds that he met with Jesus beforehand, suggests something more than just a desire for legal obligation. Nicodemus wants the law to be followed because it's Jesus' life on the line. De Jonge, "Nicodemus and Jesus," 338.

³⁸ Cf. Tom Thatcher, "Anatomies of the Fourth Gospel: Past, Present, and Future Probes," in *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel As Literature*, ed. Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 14.

himself as a follower of Jesus,³⁹ it should be noted that his burial of Jesus with spices is quite a public statement about his thoughts on the death of the controversial Jesus.⁴⁰ Additionally, as Richard Bauckham notes, there is some irony in the text that seems to highlight Nicodemus' positive role. Right after Jesus' kingship was rejected by religious leaders (19:15), two ἄρχοντες publicly dissent from that rejection and give due honor to the Messiah (19:38-41).⁴¹ Keeping with the theme of Jesus reidentifying people through the Gospel, Nicodemus has moved from identification exclusively with the Pharisees to some new ambiguous state in relation to Jesus.⁴² Jouette Bassler is correct in seeing in Nicodemus tension and ambiguity throughout the book, suggesting "though he is characterized by intimations of Christian discipleship, he retains the markers of the old state of Pharisaic Judaism."⁴³

It is difficult to make a definite statement about Nicodemus' faith status, but it's certainly significant that a member of the party who acts against Jesus and denies his kingship makes such a transition. Often, characters who "develop" offer clues to the narrative's theme and narrator's ideological position,⁴⁴ so it's significant that Nicodemus aligns more and more publicly with Jesus over the course of his arc. As Bennema reminds, for a character to develop it's not simply that we learn a new trait about them later on, but that they replace an old trait with a new one⁴⁵—Nicodemus accomplishes this by moving from meeting with Jesus in secret in John 3 to publicly honoring Jesus in John 19. E. M. Forster, an early pioneer in literary characterization, defines characters as either "flat" or "round," and the criteria in deciding if a character is "round" is looking to see if a character surprises the reader or if they cannot be summed up in one sentence.⁴⁶ Nicodemus at many points in the narrative "surprises" readers with his defense and honor of Jesus,

³⁹ Some scholars like Martyn and Culpepper see him as a "secret disciple," as he is connected with Joseph of Arimathea who also acts secretly. Martyn, *History and Theology*, 88. Culpepper, *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 136. He may also be like the sympathetic Jews who de Jonge sees as "on their way toward Jesus" but not fully at the point of being a follower. Cf. de Jonge, "Nicodemus and Jesus," 357.

⁴⁰ The quantity he brought would have likely garnered attention. Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 165; Brown and Maloney, *The Gospel of John*, 174.

⁴¹ He sees them both as "rulers." Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 165.

⁴² Cf. Debbie M. Gibbons, "Nicodemus: Character Development, Irony and Repetition in the Fourth Gospel," *Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 11 (1991): 117. See also Culpepper, "The Weave of the Tapestry," 34.

⁴³ Bassler's entire source helpfully explains that there is good evidence for and against the faith of Nicodemus—and that is what makes him ambiguous. Bassler, "Mixed Signals", 644-646 [quote from 646]. See also Culpepper, "The Weave of the Tapestry," 34.

⁴⁴ Culpepper reminds readers that, "Characterization in John is closely related to the development of the Gospel's themes. That is not to say that the characters are purely plot functions, agents, or foils, or that some of them are not richly evoked, ambiguous, or developing." Culpepper, "The Weave of the Tapestry," 23.

⁴⁵ Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach," 47.

⁴⁶ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 103-118. See also, Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach," 46-7.

especially because he is identified with the Pharisees who have many hostile or questionable interactions with Jesus. Nicodemus, in all his complexities, may be a representative of the Pharisees—a group unsure exactly how to approach Jesus (see below). While many of the Pharisees swing from ambivalence toward hostility, Nicodemus (and some others) swing more toward full acceptance of Jesus’ authority.

The Attempted Arrest (7:32, 45-52)

After Jesus comes back to Jerusalem in John 7, the Pharisees have their first major scene as a group. The Pharisees, along with the chief priests (the Sanhedrin?), send temple police to seize/arrest Jesus (7:32). The Pharisees and chief priests are responding directly to the crowd’s belief in Jesus as the Messiah, which appears to worry them. Back in 5:18, “the Jews” (probably the authorities in this case, as many Jews are captivated with Jesus) are seeking to kill Jesus. Now there is only the indication of wanting to arrest him (though perhaps killing is implied). Jesus’ message, or more likely his influence over the crowd, influenced them to send temple police—which appears an offensive move. By this action, one can discern that the Pharisees saw Jesus as a threat, though their ideological state isn’t made clear through narration of their internal voice or direct discourses.

When the temple police come back in 7:45 to report to the chief priests and the Pharisees (note the combination), the Pharisees seem to respond in anger that the deed wasn’t done, and they rhetorically ask, “Has any one of the authorities [rulers] or of the Pharisees believed in him?” (7:48). This statement becomes ironic. Nicodemus, as mentioned earlier, shows favor toward Jesus by asking for a proper defense,⁴⁷ and in doing so identifies himself as someone who is both a ruler and a Pharisee who believes in Jesus.⁴⁸ Also, ironically, Nicodemus then quotes from the law, which the Pharisees in 7:49 said the crowd (of believers) knows nothing about.⁴⁹ He is then sarcastically chastised by his fellow party members. Nicodemus, in the scene, acts as a dissenting voice among the Pharisees, functioning as a part of their group but on the fringes.⁵⁰ This contrasts with scenes where “the Jews” refers to an authoritative group. In those scenes there is never

⁴⁷ Thompson explains how Nicodemus uses the law correctly, but it is also precisely because of the law that the Pharisees scorn him. Thompson, 177. Cf. De Jonge, “Nicodemus and Jesus,” 338.

⁴⁸ Granted, Nicodemus never explicitly expresses belief in Jesus. It appears that the statement in v. 45 is irony, since a few verses later, in vs. 50-51, Nicodemus speaks up, and the narrative relates him to Jesus through the mention of him having previously gone to Jesus.

⁴⁹ Cf. Gibbons, 222.

⁵⁰ Keener describes how ancient literature uses a single dissenting voice to point out the flaws in a foolish majority view. He lists as examples Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.40-56; and 11.243-295. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 733-34.

an instance of them being divided.⁵¹ So while some Pharisees are obviously hostile to Jesus and his message, the hostilities are tempered by the presence of an alternative voice within their own party.

The Adulterous Woman (7:53-8:11)

The most difficult reference to the Pharisees to explain is in John 8, in the story of Jesus and the adulterous woman. Here the Pharisees are demonstrated as quite hostile with no alternate voice. In this story, the scribes (not present anywhere else in John) and the Pharisees apparently use the situation of the adulterous woman to try and “test” or “tempt” (πειράζοντες)⁵² Jesus in order to create a reason to arrest him. By the end of the encounter, it’s clear Jesus triumphs in the verbal contest, and the Pharisees are left defeated. If this is original to John, it does show a rather unredeemable and negative characterization of the Pharisees.

There are good reasons to not include this pericope in the examination of the Pharisees’ character in this Gospel. First and foremost, the story in 7:53 to 8:11 is not in the earliest manuscripts of John. Even if it is a story from an authentic Jesus tradition, it’s doubtful the author of John intended its inclusion.⁵³ The presence of a “trap” by the Pharisees is the sort of scenario found in the Synoptics,⁵⁴ not in John. Additionally, the grouping of the “scribes and the Pharisees” is also a more common phrase in the Synoptics,⁵⁵ while the Johannine author prefers “the chief priests and Pharisees.” Moreover, the term “scribes” is a *hapax legomenon* in John, which demonstrates we are likely dealing with material inserted by a different author. Lastly, since this section’s characterization of the Pharisees is so different than in the rest of the book, this is a major clue this portion was not originally penned by the main author. Since the Johannine author evidently did not write this scene, 7:53 to 8:11 is left out of the analysis of the original view of the Pharisees.

Jesus’ Testimony Questioned (8:12-20)

In this scene, the Pharisees are only mentioned in brief as telling Jesus, “You are

⁵¹ The one instance where the Jews are said to be divided (10:19) is probably not a reference to the hostile religious authorities, but to the population of Judea. Cf. von Wahlde, 249 (especially note 70); Poplutz, 124.

⁵² Used similarly in conjunction with the Pharisees’ actions in Matthew 16:1; 19:3 and Mark 8:11; 10:3.

⁵³ Thompson helpfully summarizes the textual problem in her commentary. Thompson, *John*, 178-79.

⁵⁴ For example, Matt. 16:1; 19:3; Mark 12:13-15; and Luke 11:53-54.

⁵⁵ This is especially prevalent in Matthew. For example, Matt. 5:20; 12:38; 15:1; 23:2; Mark 7:5; Luke 5:21, 30; 6:7; 11:53; and 15:2. See especially Jesus’ woes to the “scribes and Pharisees” in Matthew 23.

testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is invalid” (8:13). Then they fade into the background in the rest of the encounter, only possibly appearing as “they” to ask another innocuous question about the location of Jesus’ father (8:19). Considering that Jesus mentions law later (8:17), it is likely this is a legal debate and not necessarily a hostile statement against Jesus. The Pharisees’ statement about the invalidity of Jesus’ testimony is accurate, to a degree. Jewish Law demanded more than one witness for a testimony to be considered trustworthy,⁵⁶ but technically that is only applicable in criminal cases. Jesus responds, arguing for the validity of his testimony based on the Father’s and his own testimony (8:16-18). The author doesn’t include a reaction from the Pharisees or anyone else likely around,⁵⁷ so it’s difficult to imagine what the Pharisees and others thought of Jesus’ answers.⁵⁸

Trial of the Formerly Blind Man (9:13-17, 39-41)

Division among the group appears again in chapter nine, regarding the blind man. The neighbors of the man and some of those around him brought the man to the Pharisees. It’s unclear why they brought him to the Pharisees, but it might stem from some of the uncertainty surrounding his healing. They probably wanted an expert in the law to interpret the strange situation for them. It’s ironic (though not out of character in later Rabbinic literature) that the legal experts can’t agree on the interpretation; they are explicitly said to be divided (9:17). Some of the Pharisees (9:16) suggest the man is not from God because he doesn’t observe the Sabbath, but then others suggest sinners can’t perform such signs. Interestingly, this is a debate about the law⁵⁹—the same subject of Nicodemus’ challenge in chapter 7 and the question to Jesus in 8:13. The division in this chapter exemplifies that the Pharisees are not a monolithic group, that they are still trying to grapple with Jesus’ teachings and actions in relation to the law. So again, as in chapter seven, there are hostilities on the part of the Pharisees, but with voices speaking out against those hostilities.

Curiously, though, a few verses later “the Jews” takes over as the predominant term, and the tone of “the authorities” shifts.⁶⁰ This creates an awkwardness between the two scenes that may well be important. When “Pharisees” is used in 9:13-17, it appears these authorities believe the man had been blind previously. In 9:15, they ask him how he received his sight, and in verse 16 some of the Pharisees recognize a sign (the blind man

⁵⁶ Deut. 17:6; 19:15; and Num. 35:30. See also Matt. 18:16; 26:60.

⁵⁷ The Jews appear as a group a few verses later, so it’s possible they are around. Cf. Zimmermann, “The Jews,” 88.

⁵⁸ Thompson claims that the mention of “arrest” (v. 20), even if an arrest did not occur, shows the offensiveness of Jesus’ claims. Thompson, *John*, 181.

⁵⁹ See Thompson’s detailed examination of the Jewish legal aspects of working on the Sabbath. Cf. Thompson, *John*, 210-11.

⁶⁰ Cf. Ashton, “The Identity and Function,” 61.

regaining his sight) has taken place. The Pharisees further question the man about who he thinks Jesus is, assuming the man must know Jesus' nature because "it was your eyes he opened" (9:17). In the next verse, a shift happens when "the Jews" is used. It's noted that "the Jews did not believe that he [the man] had been blind and had received his sight" (9:18) so they called the man's parents. Yet just a few verses before, it seems clear that the Pharisees knew he had been blind previously. Ruben Zimmermann explains that though this scene seems to use Pharisees and "the Jews" interchangeably, the independence of the group is supported by the sequence of interrogation: "first the neighbors (vss. 8-12), then the Pharisees (vss. 13-17), and finally 'the Jews' (vss. 24-34)." He notes how the interrogations increase in length and elicit increasingly accurate confessions about Jesus from the man.⁶¹

The shift from the Pharisees's uncertainty about Jesus to the hostile nature of "the Jews" communicates the presence of two different groups with different reactions. The change in terms and response could occur because the larger category of Jews (maybe the whole Sanhedrin court?) come in verse 18 to hear the parents' testimony, establishing a second hearing,⁶² carrying with them their definite skepticism about Jesus and their agreement to excommunicate anyone who says Jesus is the Messiah.⁶³ Indeed, the Pharisees were only laypersons with no legal authority. In historical context, a legitimate trial would take place in a proper legal setting or in the presence of some person or group actually having legal authority.⁶⁴ "The Jews" may typically include Pharisees, but it's probably safe to see the Pharisees or the Pharisaic point of view in the narrative taking a back seat in favor of "the Jews" for the rest of the trial in John 9, then returning in 9:40

⁶¹ Zimmermann, "The Jews," 91. So why the sudden shift in vocabulary? One idea that von Wahlde puts forth is that these are two different sources. The Pharisee text was first (9:15-17), then redactional strata with hostile Jewish authorities (9:18-23) came later. Von Wahlde, "The Terms for Religious Authorities," 249. John 9 flows too well in my opinion to reflect different layers. Leaving the story at John 9:17 leaves a lot unsettled. The Pharisees also reappear in 9:35-41. The texts in-between fix a lot of the awkwardness that would be present if 9:18 to 34 were absent from the original story. I prefer Zimmermann's analysis of the interrogations as increasing in length and hostility.

⁶² Since 9:24 mentions that "for a second time they called the man," this suggests that this is the second time that he's been interrogated. On the surface it does seem as if "they" functions to combine "Pharisees" and "the Jews" as meaning the same thing. Yet, the shift in vocabulary must be properly explained. Since "the Jews" are a larger category which would include Pharisees, it's perfectly reasonable to see this as the "second" time the man is examined by the Jewish leaders. Also, it should be further noted that in 9:24-34, we don't find either the term "Pharisee" or "the Jews"—instead we get the vague third person pronoun, "they." Thus, it's ambiguous as to what group we are talking about at all. However, it is most likely "the Jews" being referenced, since they are the last-mentioned group, and the players here are hostile, which is more characteristic of Jews than Pharisees.

⁶³ Martyn argues this is anachronistic to Jesus' time, but reflects a time when Christianity was larger and more threatening and is an actual representation of a ruling of Jewish authorities sometime prior to John's writing. Martyn, *History and Theology*, 47-48.

⁶⁴ If you take "the Jews" to refer to the ethno-religious identity, then perhaps you could view the trial as an informal "trial by mob," though I haven't found anyone who views it that way.

as the Pharisees continue to follow Jesus around and ask him questions. Just viewing the Pharisee trial by itself shows a divided group with tension, but when the vocabulary is switched to “the Jews” the author presents a whole other group with a completely negative response.

After Jesus meets with the formerly blind man, apparently some of the Pharisees are near enough to ask a question in response to Jesus’ comment on seeing. They ask, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” (9:40). Jesus responds with a cryptic statement: “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains” (9:41). This retort from Jesus may be read as a typical rebuke of the Pharisees’ hypocrisy, as is common in the Synoptics.⁶⁵ If that is accurate, this is the only such rebuke and reference to the Pharisees’ hypocrisy in John.⁶⁶ What the Pharisees originally asked Jesus, it should be noted, is an innocuous question. Certainly, Jesus uses even “innocent” questions as a teaching moment throughout the Gospels, but there is nothing inherently hostile in the Pharisees’ question.

About this scene, Poplutz suggests that the fact of the presence of the Pharisees near Jesus might hint at sympathetic characters among the Pharisees. “Is John indicating that not only some of the authorities but also Pharisees might be found among Jesus’ followers, maybe to learn more like Nicodemus?”⁶⁷ Poplutz admits this is highly speculative, but it’s an intriguing idea. There are not a lot of details to go on here, but it is interesting that this group of Pharisees appear close to Jesus and aren’t interested in arresting him, which they wanted to do in 7:32. The Jews were interested in killing Jesus (5:14), yet the Pharisees here don’t seem to make any offensive moves toward him. Perhaps these Pharisees sympathize with Jesus’ mission, or perhaps the narrator has included them as a convenient foil, ignoring the details that would lead to narrative continuity.

The Plot to Kill Jesus (11:45-53, 57)

The resurrection of Lazarus prompts an emergency council meeting.⁶⁸ Some Jews who saw Lazarus’ resurrection believe, but others go to the Pharisees and report on Jesus (11:45). This report has negative connotations, as the reporters are contrasted with those that believe. In the next verse, the chief priests and the Pharisees have called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. They appear predominantly concerned about how Jesus’ ministry may

⁶⁵ See for instance Jesus’ woes against the Pharisees in Matthew 23.

⁶⁶ Cf. Thompson, *John*, 219-20. See note 38 in Brown and Maloney, *An Introduction to The Gospel of John*, 164.

⁶⁷ Poplutz, “Pharisees,” 124.

⁶⁸ The Sanhedrin, maybe? Cf. Bennema, “The Identity and Composition,” 248; Martyn, *History and Theology*, 86.

lead to the destruction of their temple⁶⁹ and nation (11:48). The attempted arrest of Jesus was conducted because people believed he was the Messiah (7:32). This is now clearly described as a threat to the Jewish leaders. Because the Romans tended to hate large crowds of those they conquered gathering in the streets for fear of rebellion or protest of their rule, it is in many ways a valid concern.⁷⁰ Caiaphas, the High Priest, steps in and declares that instead of letting Jesus continue deceiving the people, they will put a stop to him. In 11:53, the chief priests, Pharisees, and anyone else present at the meeting of the Sanhedrin plan to put Jesus to death.⁷¹ At the end of the chapter (11:57), the chief priests and Pharisees are again wanting to know of anyone privy to Jesus' whereabouts for the purpose of arresting him.

A few notes bear mentioning. First, the combination of "chief priests and Pharisees" downplays the role of the Pharisees by grouping them with another order. They don't have an individualized group voice. Even though they were the ones who received the report about the resurrection of Lazarus from some of the Jews, the point of view is no longer exclusively theirs, but rather that of the wider authorities. Secondly, though the Pharisees are certainly worried about Jesus' ministry causing harm to their religion and nation, they do not call for Jesus' death. The death penalty is suggested by Caiaphas, of the priestly class and not identified with Pharisees. Now, and for the rest of the Gospel, the true enemies of Jesus and those who put him on trial will be these chief priests, as well as the general οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι.⁷² Here the prominent role of the Pharisees slowly fades and gives way to the rise of the priests who will drive the plot in the latter half of John.

Statement of Jesus' Popularity (12:19)

The brief mention of the Pharisees in 12:19 is slightly confusing. Since in 11:57 the Pharisees and the chief priests wanted to know Jesus' location to arrest him, it is probably logical that in 12:19 they were not physically present at Jesus' triumphal entry that had just occurred. Perhaps they saw the residual effects of Jesus on the crowd who went to meet the interesting figure. While spatially it's hard to tell where the reader is taken, the narrator is evidently taking us into the psychological point of view of the Pharisee group. The pressing issue is that the size of the crowd has left an impression on the Pharisees.

⁶⁹ The text literally says "this place," which is commonly agreed to be a reference to the temple. Cf. Thompson, *John*, 253.

⁷⁰ Thompson makes this point. Thompson, *John*, 254. See also Josephus' comment on Jerusalem leadership desperate to avoid any actions that would provoke a Roman response. Josephus, *JW* 2.237.

⁷¹ The text isn't clear if this is a unanimous decision.

⁷² Bennema, "The Identity and Composition," 248. Cf. 18:28-31, 35; 19:6-7, 15.

Among themselves they murmur about having gained/benefited (ὠφελεῖτε) nothing⁷³ and that “the world has gone after” Jesus.

It’s not clear, however, if these lines are said in defeat (that their mission to stop Jesus won’t work because of all his followers),⁷⁴ as a statement about what they expected to happen (that large crowds would gather around Jesus), as a lamentation of the chaos Jesus will cause (the large crowds will incite the Romans),⁷⁵ or as evidence that their suspicion was right (that Jesus is the Messiah, or at least that he is too powerful to be stopped). Since John appreciates ambiguity and irony,⁷⁶ the Pharisees’ declaration surely means several things⁷⁷ and is not necessarily hostile. This is a prime example of Johannine vagueness when it comes to this group.

The Fear of the Pharisees (12:37-43)

John announces that several “rulers” or “authorities” believed in Jesus. Apparently, they do not confess this allegiance publicly, since they fear the Pharisees will put them out of the synagogue (12:42).⁷⁸ Their fear trumps their own faith, as the next verse says, “They loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God” (12:43). The interpolation is the narrator warning that the secretly believing rulers are not acting according to what is the correct action. What is less clear is why there is a fear of the power of the Pharisees that drives the rulers to hide their faith. From the perspective in the text, there are only a few clues. For one, the Pharisees are not kind to members of their rank who want to advocate for Jesus (cf. 7:45-52, 9:13-17). In the narrative, the only explicit motive given for the Pharisees (and other Jewish leaders) being against the disciples of Jesus is the fear that the Romans will retaliate against the Jewish people if “everyone”

⁷³ Keener translates this statement “We are not doing good” and sees this as an ironic declaration that the Pharisees are doing evil. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 855.

⁷⁴ This is Keener’s view. Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 871.

⁷⁵ This is Thompson’s view. Thompson, *John*, 266-67.

⁷⁶ For a brief discussion of irony in this passage, see Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 871.

⁷⁷ After all, the narrator does not say exactly what is meant. Assuming hostility isn’t the only option, the statement seems open to multiple meanings. Bennema notes about characterization in John that “since characterization in ancient literature was primarily indirect, the reader is often left with the device of inference or gap-filling to reconstruct character. In this process, different readers may reconstruct characters differently from the same text, thereby indicating that some characters are perhaps not simple, fixed or types.” Bennema, “A Theory of Character,” 395.

⁷⁸ Martyn holds that it’s historically unlikely for the Pharisees to have any power to put people out of the synagogue. In his view, a fear of the Pharisees throwing people out of the synagogue is not accurate to Jesus’ time, but is exactly what Jewish Christian readers at the time of the writing would be going through. Martyn, *History and Theology*, 65-66. Bennama on the other hand notes that the general consensus is that Pharisees had the power of influence rather than actual political or religious power, though they probably used their influence to sway the decisions of those actually in power. Bennema, “The Identity and Composition,” 246-47.

believes in him (11:48). Also, from their rebuke during the incident with the formerly blind man, it seems they were concerned with proper observation of the Sabbath (9:16).⁷⁹ Other important facts are that “the Jews” had previously agreed to put out of the synagogue anyone who confessed Jesus as the Messiah (9:22), and that they saw discipleship to Jesus as antithetical to following Moses’ teachings (9:28). Because of the similarity of 12:42 and 9:22, maybe this text about the fear of the Pharisees is a rare case of interchangeability between the terms “the Pharisees” and “the Jews.”

Regarding the evidence that the Pharisees are not completely negative characters and possess a good deal of ambiguity, this text is definitely an outlier. John 12:42 is the clearest reference (having set aside 7:53 to 8:11 from consideration) to hostility on the part of the Pharisees toward Jesus or his followers, though since the Pharisees are not active characters in this statement, their negativity shouldn’t be overexpressed. It is striking that this statement is from the point of view of the rulers. It is from their “minds”—so it may or may not represent reality. The verse should certainly not cloud the previous references to the Pharisees which tend to show different sides to the group, since the real focus of the verse is on the rulers’ failure to publicly confess. As has been discussed, most likely some Pharisees were believers, so based on evidence from elsewhere in the narrative, the statement is not completely accurate.

In fact, this verse is the last significant reference in John to the Pharisees (besides Nicodemus), and it comes at the end of much ambiguity and tension among the Pharisee party. One could even see a slight development of the hostilities of the Pharisees over the narrative, as the most hostile references (here and in 11:45-53) have come near the end of the Pharisees’ arc in the Fourth Gospel.⁸⁰ Such characterizations only contribute another side to the ambiguous nature of this religious group.

The Functions of the Pharisees

The Pharisees are a complex group, as is evident throughout John. Based on the critical narrative examination, I am convinced the narrator’s opinion of the group is ambiguous, occasionally positive and occasionally negative. However, the function or the *sense* of the term as it relates to the narrative is still a mystery.⁸¹ Poplutz commented in her conclusion about the characterization of the Pharisees that “within a limited set of narrated character traits, each detail is likely to be meaningful” and that “the vagueness of designation concerning the group of Pharisees can be interpreted as intentional and

⁷⁹ As they are in the other Gospels, according to Cook, “A Gospel Portrait,” 222-31. For a summary of the debate about what’s acceptable on the Sabbath in Jewish literature, see Thompson, *John*, 210-11.

⁸⁰ Poplutz also observes the gradual rise of Pharisee hostilities. Poplutz, “Pharisees,” 122.

⁸¹ The function or the sense is more important than identifying what a term means, in Ashton’s view. Ashton, “The Identity and Function,” 59.

thus significant.”⁸² Though I’ll offer a few comments on why some of the Pharisees break stereotypes, break from their larger group identity, and occasionally act supportive or neutral toward Jesus, more study should be done. Studies also are needed on the different treatment of the Pharisees in John as compared with the other Gospels.⁸³

I believe the Pharisee group may function to highlight “secret disciples” of Jesus, or disciples torn between identities. In the time of John’s writing, Brown and Moloney note that “it is not implausible that in the 80s and 90s such Jewish crypto-Christians were undergoing a crisis as to whether to stay on as part of synagogue Judaism or openly to join one of the developing churches or communities.”⁸⁴ As Martyn’s theory highlights, we can see the fear of religious leaders evident with the parents in 9:22. Then 12:42-43 mentions that some rulers/authorities believed in Jesus, but their fear of the Pharisees caused them to not declare this publicly. Also Nicodemus, a Pharisee, is some sort of supporter for Jesus in his story arc, though not publicly so until the end. As this article showcases, even the Pharisees are mixed in their opinion of Jesus, some likely believing but not making public demonstrations. No Pharisee, however, shows outright allegiance to Jesus.

Martyn suggests the term “rulers” is “John’s shorthand for the secretly believing members of the Gerousia [Sanhedrin], while ‘the Pharisees’ is his term for the Loyalists who dominate that body.”⁸⁵ He’s correct in pointing out that “rulers” is attached to Nicodemus, a secret believer, who is associated with Joseph of Arimathea, who is explicitly identified as a secret believer (19:38). Additionally, in 12:42 we are told “many of the rulers” believed. Also, Martyn observes that the Jewish crowd uses “rulers” when they wonder if any of the authorities believe Jesus is the Messiah (7:26). While his observations about the rulers are keen, there are several reasons to doubt his two-level interpretation of this meaning.⁸⁶ In 7:48 “rulers” are distinguished from “Pharisees,” but

⁸² Poplutz, “Pharisees,” 125.

⁸³ Notably absent from John are woes to the Pharisees or debates between Jesus and the Pharisees, as present in the Synoptic Gospels. There is also no clear mention of their hypocrisy or over-reliance on the law. The closest we get to pointing out hypocrisy is probably John 9:40-41, where Jesus seems to suggest that though the Pharisees claim to “see” they still have sin. They should be able to see the evidence of Jesus’ identity, though they lack the right judgement. Yet, it’s nowhere near as cutting as Jesus’ statements in the Synoptics. This difference between Gospels must be explored in order to discover what the Johannine author is doing with the Pharisees in his own work. See note 38 in Brown and Moloney, *An Introduction to The Gospel of John*, 164.

⁸⁴ Brown and Moloney, *An Introduction to The Gospel of John*, 173. Cf. von Wahlde, “The Terms for Religious Authorities,” 236; Martyn, *History and Theology*, 65.

⁸⁵ Martyn, *History and Theology*, 88.

⁸⁶ Martyn’s theory begs various questions. Why are the Pharisees absent from the Passion, where a placement in that narrative would go well to work as a condemnation against the ruling Pharisees? If this scenario were the case, why is the author of John so fond of using the ambiguous *οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι* but only uses the term “Pharisee” nineteen times? And why are the Pharisees shown, per this article, to be indecisive

by that the text also implicitly links the two groups. It might be a term used for those believers *inside* the Pharisee party, but by the usage of the Pharisees in the text, sometimes even the term “Pharisee” might carry those same connotations. Pharisees are too divided to accurately represent Martyn’s Gerousia-Loyalists distinction, but if his understanding of rulers is applied to the broader “Pharisees,” a clearer picture of the function of the Pharisees emerges. Perhaps the presence of the ambiguity in the Pharisee party is a critique of power and privilege; it is difficult for those in leadership positions to come to Jesus, unlike the poor, unnamed figures who are converted rather effortlessly.

Whether or not the ambiguity in the Pharisees is referring to secret disciples, Susan Hylen points out there are rich theological implications due to the ambiguity. Hylen suggests the vagueness breaks down previous notions of a strict dualism in John because there are “disciples who have not achieved spiritual perfection and indeed still struggle with basic questions of Jesus’ identity.”⁸⁷ With her, I believe there is probably a message about disciples who are on their way, but not quite there (like maybe Nicodemus), or are scared of coming out in favor of Jesus (like the rulers). Conway summarizes the theology of ambiguity by saying,

[Ambiguity] comments on the dualism of the Gospel, undercuts it, subverts it. In the process, the notion of faith is also transformed. It becomes less stable, but no less productive. The characters that show signs of faith in the midst of their uncertainties and ambiguity still contribute in significant ways to the ministry and mission of Jesus. Indeed, perhaps they are more effective in and through their expression of a more rounded, more complex life of faith, than they might be from a place of flat and rigid certainty.⁸⁸

However, I’m not sure the ambiguity of the Pharisees contributes much toward Jesus’ ministry except that they often dialogue with him and at certain points move the plot along. We don’t see a “payoff” in the text for the faith of Nicodemus or the believing Pharisees from a narrative perspective. Yet, the awkward and private expression of faith from the believing Pharisees does show a realistic portrait of conversion and transformation.

Lastly, a favorable attitude toward Pharisees might represent a historical reality.⁸⁹ Some Pharisees could have been sympathetic to Jesus in his time on earth, which the author wanted to highlight, unlike the other Gospel texts. Similarly, the complexity could

about the nature of Jesus? Why would they have division? What is Nicodemus, a Pharisee, doing in the narrative as a character who opposes some level of Pharisee argument and (maybe) ends up a believer?

⁸⁷ Susan E. Hylen, “Three Ambiguities: Historical Context, Implied Reader, and the Nature of Faith,” in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W Skinner, Library of New Testament Studies 461 (New York: T&T Clark, 2013), 109.

⁸⁸ Conway, “Speaking through Ambiguity,” 399.

⁸⁹ For the author’s self-understanding of the work as history, see Bennema, “A Comprehensive Approach,” 43-6. For an investigation on the possible historical reality of Nicodemus, see Bauckham, *The Beloved Disciple*, 137-172.

be a meaningful inclusion because in the time of the author Pharisees (or religious leaders) were joining the Jesus movement. Martyn might not be far off about the reality of John's day, even though I disagree that characters in John's work make easy, one-to-one representations. If John were concerned for believing Pharisees in his day, this wouldn't just explain the complexities noted but might also explain the more positive portrayal, or more rounded portrayal, in the later-composed John compared to the other Gospels. There is certainly a need for further speculation on this difference.

By viewing the inclusion of the Pharisees as meaningful vocabulary, not just as a simple synonym for "the Jews," our eyes are opened, like the blind man, to what we did not see before. The Pharisees are not easily stereotyped as a monolithic group. There is tension and uncertainty in their midst. There is even some positive portrayal. John weaves a complex narrative in his Gospel with this cast of characters who aren't flat types but instead mimic the shifting thoughts of humanity and the intricacies of believing. The Pharisees are a multifaceted group, with ambiguities that demand to be properly considered and no longer ignored, because they may just be the most realistic portrait of faith found in the whole text.

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