

Bearing Witness Nicodemusly: A Christomorphic Assessment of Crypto-discipleship in John 7

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Abstract

Johannine scholars routinely argue that the fourth evangelist regarded the secret behaviour of crypto-disciples as cowardly and contemptible. Some further propose that their shaming through the narrative was part of the evangelist's pastoral strategy for 'outing' crypto-believers within the synagogues of his locality. While the broad outline of this assessment may be correct, a more nuanced picture emerges when particular instances of the phenomenon are examined in the light of the gospel's Christology, for in John's gospel, Jesus is sometimes also depicted as operating in secrecy and behaving in a clandestine manner. Scholars frequently interpret this Christological feature using theological categories, but there is copious evidence indicating that Jesus' covert actions were grounded in his socio-historical and cultural setting. In that case, this article postulates that John does not always censure a disciple's secret behaviour, and that each instance should therefore be evaluated with regard to its christomorphicity. To

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

test this hypothesis, the article examines Jesus' crypto-behaviour, especially in John 7:1–13, to establish and validate criteria for determining when the evangelist approved of covert conduct. It then employs these criteria to evaluate the portrayal of Nicodemus in John 7:45–52. It concludes that while John generally censured crypto-disciples, he nevertheless approved of secret conduct and witness in particular instances, if they conformed to Jesus' mission. This finding has contemporary application to covert Christian witness in hostile contexts.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

There are ample reasons to support the current consensus among scholars that John's gospel characterises a group of individuals as crypto-disciples. These were believers in Jesus, who, for various reasons, kept their new-found faith secret from their fellow Jews. The evidence is overwhelming. For a start, the matter-of-fact manner in which Joseph of Arimathea is explicitly labelled as μαθητῆς τοῦ Ἰησοῦ κερρυμμένος δὲ διὰ τὸν φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων (a disciple of Jesus having been in secret for the fear of the Jews; 19:38), suggests that he was one among several such secret disciples. Joseph certainly appears in the gospel in the company of Nicodemus, a character who though not explicitly labelled as a crypto-disciple, is nevertheless repeatedly introduced with indicators pointing in that direction (3:1–2; 7:50; 19:39). Moreover, according to 12:42–43, τῶν ἀρχόντων πολλοὶ (many of the rulers) believed in Jesus, but failed to make public confession of their faith, so as to avoid excommunication, 'for they loved human

glory more than the glory that comes from God'.² It is thus safe to conclude that they were of a reasonable number.

Besides, the setting of John's gospel adequately explains why such a group of crypto-disciples would have emerged. After all, Jesus' public ministry, especially in Judea, proceeded within a hostile context of general agitation in society, intra-religious sectarian bullying in the synagogues, and aggressive Roman colonial intimidation, a milieu which would have invariably led to the cultivation of discreet and clandestine conduct on the part of non-conforming minority groups. This inimical atmosphere is plainly evident, for example, in the hostile interrogation of the healed invalid of Bethesda (5:9–12), the ordeal to which the healed blind man of John 9 was subjected by the Pharisees (9:24–34), the cagy reluctance of his own parents to vouch for him (9:20–23), and the heavy-handed plot by the Pharisees to kill Lazarus (12:10). Such an unfriendly atmosphere made clandestine behaviour attractive, especially for those with much to lose in publicly declaring their faith.

Neither was Jesus himself immune from this intimidation. Scouts were repeatedly sent by the Pharisees to spy on him (11:46, 56–57). He foiled attempts to be arrested (7:30, 44) or to be killed (10:31, 39). And the narrative repeats references to secret plots against him (5:18; 11:46–53). Moreover, on occasions, some of Jesus' conventional disciples,³ aware

² Unless otherwise stated all English Language citations from the Bible are from the NRSV.

³ John's use of the term μαθητής for followers of Jesus is quite fluid and may be classed into four separate categories, namely, (a) the conventional disciples (2:2), (b) named and anonymous characters not within the inner core of Jesus' group but who nevertheless perform discipleship functions (19:38–39), (c) as a general term for people who believed in Jesus and 'continue in my word' (8:31) and (d) for some members of the ὄπισθον (crowd), a wider group of followers who believed in Jesus, but whose allegiance to Jesus was not certain and some of whom murmured when they

of being spied on, resorted to covert conduct (e.g. 11:28), and once, for fear, locked themselves behind closed doors (20:19). Indeed, the atmosphere was so charged that, on the fateful day of Jesus' execution, even Pilate was intimidated by, and ἐφοβήθη (afraid) of the crowd (19:8). In such a hostile atmosphere, the fact that some of Jesus' followers chose to keep their heads below the parapet, often within the confines of the existing religious structures, should not be surprising. The fourth evangelist certainly appears quite interested in the comings and goings of the crypto-believers. This no doubt raises several questions of socio-historical, literary-theological and pastoral-rhetorical importance.

1.2. Scholars' assessment of John's attitude to crypto-discipleship

Given this evidence in the text, Johannine scholars have examined the phenomenon with the aim of (a) delineating the concise characterisation of these crypto-disciples (Barrett, 1978; de Jonge, 1971; Martyn, 1968), (b) defining the exact features of the socio-historical situation which necessitated and nurtured their secrecy (Brown 1978; 1979; de Jonge 1971; Martyn 1968), (c) determining the theological motivations and justifications they may have mounted in defence of their clandestine behaviour (Bultmann, 1971; Culpepper 1983; Rensberger 1988), and (d) analysing the evangelist's attitude towards their covert conduct, especially taking cognisance of the probable context of his first readers (Bennema 2009; Conway 2002; Culpepper, 1983:136; Hillmer, 1996: 77–97; Koester 2003; Tanzer, 1991:285–300). The present study contributes to the last category of studies.

did not understand Jesus' teaching and eventually deserted him (6:61–66), or even attempted to stone Jesus (8:59). Accordingly, even when a character is labelled as a μαθητής it is nevertheless possible that John is not asserting that that character fully believed in Jesus as the 'conventional disciples' did.

With regards to the evangelist's attitude towards the crypto-disciples, most Johannine scholars are of the view that he roundly censured their clandestine behaviour, regarding it to be cowardly and contemptible. In the famous words of Brown (1978:11–12; cf. 1966; 1979:72), 'John has contempt for [the crypto-believers] and holds up the blind man [of John 9] as an example of the kind of courage such people should have - courage to leave the synagogue and come to Jesus'. It is safe to say that this view is universally held by most scholars. However, in its details, there are nuanced differences among scholars regarding how they assess the evangelist's attitude in particular instances of crypto-discipleship⁴ in the gospel.

Four categories of scholarly approaches may be discerned, namely, (a) John condemns crypto-discipleship in every instance, because the group's Christology was flawed, (b) John condemns crypto-discipleship in general, but offers opportunity for the group's redemption with his account of Jesus' burial by two crypto-disciples, (c) John condemns crypto-disciples in all instances, because of the ambiguities in their praxes, and (d) John condemns crypto-disciples, but employs instances in the narrative as rhetorical strategy to help his readers adopt the correct behaviour in their witness. I now briefly explain each one of these approaches.

1.2.1. John condemns crypto-disciples for their flawed Christology

In the first group are scholars such as Martyn (1968), de Jonge (1971), Esler and Piper (2006:72–73), Freyne, (1985:117–143) and Meeks, (1985:93–115) who believe that John was wholly dismissive of the faith of crypto-disciples, both in Jesus' own time as well as in the milieu of

⁴ For the purpose of this article, I define crypto-discipleship as secret existence and conduct of a Johannine character who also displays signs of devotion to Jesus.

the Johannine community, because he consistently judged their Christology to be fundamentally flawed. These scholars also tend to take the view that the actions of Joseph and Nicodemus in burying Jesus are negatively portrayed by the evangelist, or at best as being ‘too little too late’. Similarly, they believe that the evangelist censures Nicodemus’ behaviour in the Sanhedrin as portrayed in John 7. In the view of de Jonge (1971:341), for example, Nicodemus in John 7 ‘stood on the wrong side of the dividing line between the true believers who lived in communion with him whom God sent to the world, and the unbelieving world’.

Martyn (1968:116–128), who proposed reading the Gospel of John as a ‘two-level drama’, and whose work has served as foundational to scholarly analyses of Johannine crypto-discipleship, proposed five main features of the group, namely, (a) that Nicodemus played a representative role for the group, (b) that their secret behaviour resulted from their dread of excommunication from the synagogues and the immense social consequences thereof, (c) that ‘their secret faith is closely bound up with the hope for the Prophet like Moses’ (1968:116), (d) that the main theological reason for remaining secret was their inability to use a technical Midrashic exegesis to confidently ascertain whether Jesus was indeed this Prophet like Moses, and (e) that John vehemently disagreed with them because he believed that the settling of Jesus’ identity went beyond technical Midrash to a full personal experience of Jesus as the Son of God. Thus for Martyn,⁵ the Johannine crypto-disciples could not be regarded in anyway as believers in Jesus since their Christology fell far below the correct Johannine Christological confession (cf. 20:31).

⁵ I concur with Barrett’s assessment that Martyn’s reconstruction of the history of the Johannine community, and thus of the crypto-disciples ‘contains a substantial measure of conjecture’ (1978:432).

1.2.2. John condemns crypto-disciples, but invites them to 'out' themselves

The second category of scholars such as Barrett (1978), Brown (1979), Bultmann (1971) and Rensberger (1988) assert that while condemning the crypto-disciples, John nevertheless used his gospel to send them inviting signals, thus opening the door for their potential inclusion in the true faith. In the words of Bultmann (1971:454), 'their faith is not a genuine faith ... [yet] ... Obviously such secret disciples still have the possibility of their faith becoming genuine'. Rensberger (1988:41), whose contribution may be regarded as archetypical of this approach, argues that the crypto-disciples were successful in concealing their faith to such an extent that it 'caused considerable distress to John and his community... Both their inadequate Christology and their fear of being known draw down harsh criticism from the Fourth Evangelist'.

Indeed, Rensberger postulates that John's chief purpose for writing the Gospel was to draw the crypto-disciples out into courageous public confession of full faith in Jesus: 'it may well be that if the Fourth Gospel has a missionary intent toward anyone, it is toward these secret believers' (1988:41). According to Rensberger (1988:114), in admonishing Nicodemus to be born again, for example, Jesus was urging the crypto-disciples to 'out' themselves from their secrecy, 'to jeopardize their position as rulers and their standing as Pharisees, [and] to align themselves with the "accursed" (7:49)'. Similar to the first category of scholarly approaches, Rensberger believes that the evangelist viewed the actions of Joseph and Nicodemus in John 19 with ambivalence. Likewise, he believes Nicodemus is negatively portrayed in John 7: it is 'hardly likely that [Nicodemus'] timid legal quibble would constitute a confession of faith satisfactory to the fourth Evangelist' (1988:39).

1.2.3. John condemns crypto-disciples for their ambiguous praxes

The third category of scholars, exemplified by Bennema (2013:36–58), Brant (2004), Howard-Brook (2003), Hylan (2009), Koester (2003: 229), Lincoln (2000), Myers (2012b:289–298), Skinner (2013) and Whitenton (2016:141–158), who also tend to employ insights from literary theories, argue that while John no doubt condemned the crypto-disciples, it was not so much their theology but the ambiguities in their non-committal stance which drew the evangelist's opprobrium. So, Howard-Brook, (2003:435) for example, detects several ambiguities and ironies in the actions of Joseph and Nicodemus in relation to Jesus' burial, ironies which ultimately cast them in a negative light: 'This all adds up to a very dark picture of Joseph and Nicodemus, although not one for which we cannot have compassion. These men rest on the all-too-familiar comfortable cushions of Christianity, from which we offer thanks to God without risk of pain'.

Similarly, with regard to Nicodemus' behaviour in John 7, Lincoln (2005:259) observes that the evangelist is at pains to stress that though Nicodemus was sympathetic to Jesus, a sympathy 'which shows itself here in his fairness and concern for due process', he nevertheless remains as 'one of them' and not as 'a disciple of Jesus who was also a Pharisee and Jewish leader'. In other words, in John 7, the evangelist at best portrays Nicodemus as a fair-minded Pharisee, certainly not as a true believer in Jesus. These scholars argue that John's critique of the group stemmed from his own dualistic approach to Christian existence which left no room for the ambiguous stances adopted by the crypto-disciples. In the end, therefore, the concluding 'outing' of the two crypto-disciples expressed John's invitation to the group to abandon their secrecy and join the true disciples.

1.2.4. John depicts ambiguities of crypto-discipleship as pastoral strategy

A fourth category of writers are less dismissive of the ambiguities of faith exhibited by the historical crypto-disciples, but nevertheless assert that John employs his account as a pastoral-rhetorical strategy to draw his readers to reject clandestine Christian existence. The ambivalence exhibited by these characters, according to these writers, leaves room for readers to reach different conclusions as to whether a particular instance of crypto-behaviour by a character is appropriate or not.

So Bassler (1989:635–646), for example, argues that John resists any attempt to positively or negatively resolve the ambiguities associated with the explicitly identified crypto-disciples. He thus ultimately draws the reader to address such ambiguities in their own attitude toward Jesus and thereby resolve to be fully committed to Jesus. To Bassler, the ambiguous conduct of these crypto-disciples was itself indication of their not having reached fully-fledged faith in Jesus. And this is still reflected even in their burial of Jesus. For instance, ‘Nicodemus’ repeated professions and actions of faith have made him no more than a proximate “other”, the other who is beginning to challenge the limits of otherness but who remains “other” nonetheless’ (1989:646). So, while Bassler denies that John explicitly passed judgement on Nicodemus as a crypto-disciple, she nevertheless believes John expected his readers to reject ambiguities in favour of a categorical faith in Jesus.

Though she also argues that the evangelist does not resolve the ambiguities surrounding crypto-disciples, Conway (2002:324–341) reaches an opposite conclusion from Bassler in seeing their ambiguous stance in less negative light. She argues that the crypto-disciples are imperfect, but so also are the other Johannine characters, a situation which would have no doubt been matched by the real-life existence of

John's first readers. The ambiguities of crypto-disciples such as Nicodemus therefore reflected the realities of life, and are employed by the evangelist as a way of encouraging the readers to identify with the characters, and so enable them to address the ambiguities in their own faith. Conway (2002:340) thus concludes that the presence of ambiguous crypto-disciples such as Nicodemus,

[C]omments 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.

It is evident from the above synopsis that scholars universally agree that John globally censured crypto-disciples. However, there are nuanced differences in scholarly assessment of the evangelist's attitude to particular instances of crypto-behaviour of disciples. It is also apparent that these differences in scholarly opinion reflect the lack of firm criteria for determining the evangelist's attitude in each instance of depiction of the crypto-behaviour. The present article argues that the Gospel narrative itself, especially when Jesus' behaviour is placed in the foreground, provides the pointers for determining these criteria.

1.3. The present proposal

As will shortly be shown, the Johannine crypto-disciples are not the only characters of the gospel who act in secret or in a covert manner. Indeed, Jesus, the hero of the gospel, is sometimes also depicted with similar features. In fact, apart from the single instance in which it is

used to identify Joseph of Arimathea in John 19:38, the κρυπτῶ (secret; John 7:4, 10; 18:20) word group and its cognate, ἐκρύβη (hide; John 8:59, 12:36) are used only with reference to Jesus (BDAG 571).⁶ As Stibbe (1994:19; cf., 1991:19–37) astutely puts it, in John’s gospel, ‘Jesus is an elusive hero’.

Scholars have long recognised this particular Christological feature as a significant Johannine theme. Yet, they have tended to solely use the theological idea of ‘revelation and concealment of the Messiah’ as a conceptual grid to explain it, believing the feature to be imposed by the fourth evangelist on the gospel traditions (Bultmann 1971:294; Dunderberg, 2012:221–244; Hamid-Khani 2000; Stibbe 1994:22). Yet, within the evidently inimical context of hostilities of the religious leaders towards Jesus and intimidation of his followers, Jesus’ clandestine behaviour has strong socio-historical resonance. After all, as Neyrey (1998:84) avers, ‘groups subject to coercion by more powerful groups deal with their antagonists by trying to equalize power by hiding information or resources’.⁷ Even without the antagonism, secrecy was not always viewed negatively in the first-century Mediterranean cultural context, since it often functioned to undergird pivotal cultural values.

Moreover, recent applications of literary theories on characterisation to gospels studies (e.g. Bennema 2009; 2013:36–58; Myers 2012a; Du

⁶ A related word, λάθρα (secret) is used in an approving sense of Martha in 11:28.

⁷ This manifestation of the effects of the pervasive hostile social context on the behaviour of the Jesus group is also implied, but in muted ways, in the Synoptic Gospels, for example in Mark’s theme of Messianic secret (cf. Luz 1983; Räisänen, 1990; Watson 2010; Wrede 1971). Indeed, Hooker, (1974:40–58) has suggested that several elements of Mark’s Messianic Secret are discernible in the Christology of the Johannine prologue. A similar phenomenon has been described with regard to Matthew’s gospel (cf. Lybæk 2002:197–243), but the phenomenon is definitely heightened in John’s gospel, which admittedly gives more attention to Jesus’ Judean ministry than the synoptics.

Rand 1985:18–36; Resseguie 2005; Rhoads and Syreeni 2004; Skinner 2013; Whinton 2016:141–158) have underlined the fundamental importance of employing the evangelists' characterisation of Jesus, clearly in supplementation with their commentaries and footnotes, as standards for determining their 'ideological points of view' or attitude to the characters (Bennema 2013:48). In other words, gospel characters must be evaluated by their christomorphicity—the degree to which their speeches and actions or inactions are conformed to the manner in which Jesus is also characterised in the same gospel.

In that case, and given the manner in which Jesus is depicted in the Gospel, it would appear that secrecy *per se* was not the main factor which invited the fourth evangelist's censure of crypto-disciples. This in turn generates the possibility that John's attitude to particular instances of crypto-behaviour by a crypto-disciple would be nuanced and certainly not *prima facie* negative. One fruitful avenue for establishing criteria for identifying the fourth evangelist's attitude to particular instances of crypto-discipleship, therefore, is to situate the investigation of the phenomenon within the socio-cultural context of the first-century Mediterranean world's attitude to secret conduct, and specifically as this secrecy is expressed in Jesus' behaviour.

When this contextual factor is considered in the foreground, a far more complex picture emerges, whereby the fourth evangelist appears to approve of clandestine conduct, if it conformed to Jesus' mission. John, it is thus hypothesised, censured crypto-disciples who, in order to retain their privileged status in the community, failed to bear witness to Jesus. However, he was less disapproving of particular instances in which the discretion and secret witness of a crypto-disciple was christomorphic.

In this article I aim to test this hypothesis through a christomorphic assessment of the particular instance of crypto-discipleship in John 7.

I first summarise some of the socio-cultural features of secrecy in first-century AD Palestine. I then catalogue Jesus' crypto-behaviour in the Gospel of John and specifically exegete the account in John 7:1–13 in order to identify and validate a set of criteria for the Christomorphic assessment. These criteria are then employed to examine the characterization of Nicodemus in the concluding paragraph of John 7. A final brief section reflects on the relevance of the findings to contemporary Christian witness in hostile contexts.

2. Culture of Secrecy in First-century AD Palestine

Tefft (1980:320) defines secrecy as 'the mandatory or voluntary, but calculated concealment of information, activities and relationship ... It is an adaptive device containing five interrelated processes: security (control of information); entrusted disclosure; espionage; evaluation of spying and post-hoc security measure'. It is, in Watson's (2010:19) words, 'intentional concealment'. To be secret about an issue is 'to block information about it or evidence of it from reaching that person, and to do so intentionally: to prevent him from learning it, and thus from possessing it, making use of it or revealing it' (Bok 1989:5).

In that regard, secrecy may on the face of it be frowned upon in large sections of today's westernised world, but it played a pivotal cultural function in first-century AD Palestine. Indeed, secrecy, according to Pilch (1994:151; cf. Freund 1991:45–61; Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998:141–142; Neyrey 1998:79–109), was 'an integral part of Mediterranean culture required by the demands of the core cultural values, honour and shame'. In a society of limited goods as it was, there were definitely occasions when secrecy was regarded as essential, and so praiseworthy conduct.

For a start, the demands for competition imposed by the limitation on goods generated inter-kinship mutual suspicions that in turn compelled discretion and covert actions and speeches to protect kinship advantages (Malina 1978:162–176). Moreover, individuals and groups were acutely sensitive to the envy of others, and for the avoidance of the ‘evil eye’ adopted behaviours that camouflaged the realities of their existence (Meeks 2003; Smith 1987:66–80). Accordingly, under-information, misinformation and often vague information were common features of the culture of first-century Palestine. As put by Billings (2006:93 n. 11), ‘secrecy, concealment, and deception do not have in the ancient world the negative moral overtones often present in the modern Western world. To the ancient Palestinian Jew secrecy and deception are legitimate and even expected social skills that might be utilised to enhance the honour of an individual or group and to bring shame upon opponents’.

This is not to say that secret conduct was always judged positively. A person’s covert action or inaction may be hailed as heroic by members of their kinship group because it protected that group’s honour. And indeed there was a parallel discourse in the first-century Mediterranean context characterising secret conduct in a negative light (e.g. *Sipre Deut 13:7*; *Dionysius of Halicarnassus RA 8.78.3*). All the same, such judgements depended on the motivation and purpose for the secrecy rather than the secret conduct itself. Moreover, the same clandestine act would be judged as shameful by other groups because it breached their honour code and excluded them. As Neyrey (1998:80) observes, ‘Information control or secrecy serves to establish group boundaries between outsiders and insiders’.

Accordingly, secret conduct was judged secondary to its purpose. Its key importance lay in how it served as a tool for maintaining the pivotal

cultural values of the society and sustaining the boundaries between groups. Disguised subterfuge, subliminal espionage, veiled deception, and certainly wary discretion and reticence in sharing vital information, and other features of secrecy were all employed to maintain group values. In the words of Pilch (1999:46), secrecy in the ancient Mediterranean world was regarded as ‘a legitimate cultural strategy for maintaining and safeguarding honour. When secrecy fails, it is equally legitimate to resort to deception and outright lies in order to protect or gain honour’. Indeed, in certain circumstances, ‘telling the truth could merit damnation, if this constituted betrayal of another to an oppressor’ (Keener 2003:708). This fact no doubt demands nuanced contextual evaluation of secret conduct by biblical characters⁸.

An aggravating element in the case of Palestine during the first century AD was the pervasive presence of the Roman colonial authorities. The occupation created constant tensions within the society, and in turn shaped how ordinary people behaved towards the authorities themselves and towards each other, an important component of which behaviour was secrecy. Indeed, invasions of the territory in the prior centuries by pagan powers had only served to inspire various subversive behaviours among the peasantry, and in some cases, as it was with the Maccabean era, resulted in successfully organised revolts (Horsley 1999:11). As stated by Sheldon (2007:99), ‘Instead of unifying the Jews, the Hellenising of Judea became a flashpoint for revolt’.⁹ The Roman

⁸ The phenomenon of secrecy is also widespread in the OT, on which see Craven (1989:35–49), Roberts (1988:211–220) and Williams (2001).

⁹ As Horsley (1999) has eloquently shown, the emergence of violent sects such as the Zealots, the fourth philosophy, and the Sicarii, and non-violent apocalyptic messianic groups such as the Qumran sectaries, and the mainstream Pharisaic sect was directly occasioned by this socio-political situation. Even those in society who disapproved of violence nevertheless covertly protected violent revolutionaries as they hated the invaders even more. A case in point is in the accounts in the Book of Judith in which

invasion of Palestine inherited this internecine agitation, and in fact worsened it with their aggressive and often heavy-handed treatment of ordinary people (Fears 1980). In such circumstances, subversive behaviour directed towards the colonial authorities or their Jewish surrogates in the forms of the religious and aristocratic elites was not just viewed approvingly by fellow Jews, but in fact was encouraged by some. Secret conduct was after all one of the few weapons available to the oppressed to subvert their oppressors.

Moreover, the colonial situation did not totally unite the Jews against the invaders as one would naturally imagine. On the contrary, the invasions merely heightened divisions and inter-group rivalries that fed covert conduct directed towards fellow Jews. To begin with, the Roman colonial authorities employed a ‘divide and rule’ tactic which ultimately fostered intra-Jewish mutual suspicion of each other, and especially of the religious hierarchy who collaborated with the colonial authorities. In addition to corrupting the religious elites, the Romans developed a ‘network of personal alliances with the ruling classes throughout the empire’ (Fears 1980:98).¹⁰ Those with privileged power such as the temple rulers and the Pharisees viewed other emerging groups with intense suspicion and employed their powers to bully the general populace and keep them in check. In response, many groups resorted to the use of clandestine behaviour to resist such bullying.

the heroine employed ‘lies, deceit, *double entendre*, assassinations and seductions ... for a good cause... She was as righteous as a secret agent can be’ (Sheldon 2007:115). Evidently, the Jesus group must be sharply distinguished from such revolutionary movements. Even so, the average first-century reader of John’s gospel would have been conversant with this complex attitude to secrecy generated by the centuries of invasions of Palestine.

¹⁰ The Tobiad family line described by Josephus (*Antiquities* 12.154–236) was one such example.

All these resulted not only in disenfranchising the majority peasant poor, but also worsening the sense of awareness of limited goods in society, thus feeding a frenzy of intra-Jewish conflicts in Judea (Hanson and Oakman 1998; Ripley 2015:605–635). Even among the poor, some resorted to espionage on their fellow Jews on behalf of the colonial authorities, evidently for financial gain. Mutual suspicion was thus rife. Minority novelty groups which did not conform to the existing social structures were viewed with even more mistrust by ordinary folks. It was accordingly equally natural that mistrusted groups would behave with wary discretion against others in society. As eloquently catalogued by Smit (1993:20; cf. Watson 2010), the earliest Christians were only one of the many groups who had to respond to this atmosphere by adopting subversive practices and discourses ‘that reacted against the dominant discourse of imperial control either directly or indirectly’.

It is no wonder, then, that in this context, watchful discretion and sometimes covert conduct would be part of the conduct of Jesus’ earliest followers in Judea. This is clearly evident in the Gospel of John. As Neyrey (1998:107–109; cf. Petersen, 2008:72–75; Richard, 1985: 96–112) catalogues, Johannine characters employ clandestine strategies ranging from the use of information control (e.g. 1:31–33; 8:44, 55; 9:24–25), hiding (e.g. 8:59; 12:36; 3:2), evasive speech (e.g. 9:21–22), deception (e.g. 7:12, 47), espionage (e.g. 7:34–35), differences in public-private discourses (e.g. 11:28 vs. 7:4, 13, 26), use of parables and enigmas (e.g. 10:6; 16:25), ironies and double entendres (e.g. 6:42; 7:27; 9:29) to shield group honour and outwit the opposing groups. North (2001; cf. Tanzer 1991:285–301) has also drawn attention to the underlying current of espionage and clandestine behaviour in the Lazarus narrative as indications of the persecuted status of the Johannine community. As I now demonstrate, a similar feature is seen in how Jesus is portrayed in the gospel.

3. Jesus' Crypto-behaviour in John's Gospel

Pilch's (1999:130) claim that 'Jesus was a master at [secrecy]' is unnecessarily facile and certainly an exaggeration, but it nevertheless captures a significant truth in relation to the characterisation of Jesus in the fourth Gospel. For John's Gospel furnishes several indications that Jesus sometimes behaved in a clandestine manner. For ease of analysis, I categorise these clandestine behaviours into four classes, namely, (a) Jesus' sudden withdrawals from the public, (b) his acquisition of 'insider information' from his opponents, (c) his use of cryptic language on occasions and (d) his specific clandestine conduct in relation to his brothers in John 7:1–13. Since John 7:1–13 contains elements of all categories it will be appropriate to more fully exegete that passage in a separate section. But prior to that, I summarise the general indication of Jesus' crypto-behaviour in the whole gospel.

3.1. Jesus' sudden withdrawals from the public

On at least eleven occasions in John's Gospel (4:1; 5:13; 6:15; 7:1, 30, 44; 8:20, 59; 10:39–40; 11:54; 12:36) Jesus explicitly withdraws from public view in a manner that can only be described as covert. The first¹¹ explicit statement of this phenomenon is in John 4:1–3, when Jesus became aware that the Pharisees believed he was baptizing more followers than John the Baptist. It is then said that Jesus ἀφῆκεν

¹¹ In John 2:23–25, the evangelist reports distrust on Jesus' part towards some of his followers in Jerusalem with language evoking the theme of secrecy—'Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone'. As Malina and Rohrbaugh (1998:141) comment, 'Such distrust is rooted in uncertainty about how others might react if secret information were made available. Moreover, secrecy makes it difficult for outsiders to predict the actions of insiders and to take counteraction against them'. It is, however, not stated if Jesus explicitly withdrew from them as a result of his mistrust for these Jerusalem 'believers'.

(abandoned or separated from) his ministry in Judea and ‘started back to Galilee’. Ἀφῆκεν in 4:3 is a rather strong word for describing separation from a place (BDAG 156–157) that Moloney (1998:115) for example renders Jesus’ movement as ‘flight from Judea’. Evidently, Jesus did not want to attract the hostilities of the Pharisees towards himself at this stage, leading to his abrupt curtailment of what was proving to be a successful mission. In 5:13, Jesus is said to have ἐξένευσεν (secretly slipped away, dodged, escaped, or disappeared) in the crowd, a word which was then used not uncommonly to describe the clandestine escapades of terrorist assassins of the time (cf. Josephus’ *Jewish Wars* 2.254–255). John perhaps simply meant that Jesus could not be recognised from among the crowd. Yet the evangelist’s peculiar choice of word buttresses the general emphasis on Jesus’ clandestine conduct.

In John 6:15, Jesus ἀνεχώρησεν (departed or withdrew), or as a few manuscripts have it, Jesus φεύγει (flees; cf. Aland and Others 2005:335 n.3; Beasley-Murray 1987:84) in order to avoid being crowned king by the people. In either rendition, Jesus is depicted as avoiding a situation which conflicted with his divine mission, not by direct confrontation, but by reticence and withdrawal. In 7:1, Jesus again withdrew from Judea because of the assassination plots against him a context which served as ‘a continuing ground bass, extending through the whole of chapter 7’ (Beasley-Murray 1987:106). The same is reported in 7:30 and 7:44, where it is stated that the temple police failed to πιάσαι (capture) Jesus because his hour had not yet arrived. Exactly how Jesus evaded capture on both occasions is unstated, but it is most likely that John intended his readers to take this to have been a miraculous escape. As Bulmann (1971:302; cf. Barrett 1978:323) puts it, ‘it is as if a spell lay on his opponents: no one can lay hands on Him, for His hour is not yet come’.

In 8:20 John again indicates that despite Jesus' apparently provocative teachings in the vicinity of the treasury of the temple, no one ἐπίασεν αὐτόν (captured him), the evangelist's point being that Jesus had public freedom and boldness to teach despite the hostile context. Yet, in 8:59, the offended listeners attempted to stone Jesus for blasphemy, but Jesus successfully ἐκρύβη καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ (hid himself and escaped from the temple). It may well be that John underlines this to be a miraculous escape (so Barrett 1978:353) or a theological gloss by the evangelist underlining the 'idea of the hidden Messiah' (so, Bultmann 1971:328 n.4). Yet, it need not necessarily be taken that Jesus miraculously made himself invisible or even that the assailants were unable to throw the stone. Jesus may well have quickly 'slipped away' to evade the stoning (cf. Luke 4:30; cf. Keener 2003:773).

In 10:39–40, Jesus again escapes capture and withdraws into hiding. The exact location of refuge is debated by interpreters. Some (e.g. Barrett 1978:387; Keener 2003:830) locate it as Perea. However, it is more likely that it was Batanea, in the tetrarchy of Philip (so Beasley-Murray 1987:178; Carson 1991:400; Lincoln 2005:312).¹² In that case, the passage indicates that Jesus knew that his life was in danger from both religious and political enemies, and needed to seclude himself and in effect took political refuge from his Judean opponents.

In 11:54,¹³ Jesus again learnt of the plot by the Sanhedrin to kill him, so as was the case of 10:40, he took evasive actions and withdrew into

¹² Arguments in favour of Batanea as against Perea include, (a) John 1:28 indicates the place name as Bethany and (b) Perea remained under Herod Antipas, whose territory was unlikely to have been regarded as a safe haven by Jesus, given his execution of the Baptist.

¹³ In 11:30, Jesus inexplicably remained at the outskirts of Bethany, delaying the actual time of entry to the compound of the Bethany sisters to raise Lazarus from the dead. Though this behaviour is difficult to explain, it nevertheless bears some of the

hiding. The place of refuge here is interestingly denoted as ἐρήμου, which describes a desolate, isolated wilderness. This is most likely the mountainous district north east of Jerusalem. The temptation to read this flight in theological terms as ‘a new exodus theme’ (so Keener 2003:858), is strong, given John’s peculiar vocabulary. However, its historical resonance must have impressed itself on John’s first readers, who knew that several oppressed anti-society members of the time used these desolate regions as places of secret refuge. Finally, in 12:36b, John states again that Jesus deliberately went into hiding after he had spoken to the crowds.¹⁴ Together, the data show that Jesus sometimes suddenly withdrew from the public into secrecy, a behaviour which can only be judged as appropriate in conformity with his mission.

3.2. Jesus’ acquisition of ‘insider information’ from his opponents’ camp

A second feature of Jesus’ crypto-behaviour in John’s gospel is found in the group of passages in which the narrative suggests that Jesus acquired ‘insider information’ from the camp of his opponents, information which proved beneficial to his mission. John does not indicate the exact sources of the information, and it is possible that some of these passages indicate Jesus’ omniscience. Even so, the evangelist’s descriptions on some occasions, lead to the conclusion that Jesus likely received such information through the crypto-disciples among his opponents.

characteristics of his general clandestine conduct and certainly fits in with the secrecy motifs associated with the Lazarus narrative (North, 2001).

¹⁴ This final withdrawal is interesting because it is theologically linked with the pervasive Johannine theme of light and darkness (cf. Bultmann 1971:357; Keener 2003:882; Moloney 1998:356). The Synoptic Gospels also feature several sudden

The first example of this phenomenon is in John 4:1, where John indicates that ‘Jesus *learned* that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”’. Several features of this verse lead to the conclusion that the information was naturally acquired through a sympathiser within the Pharisees’ camp. Firstly, the introductory qualifier Ὡς οὖν (now when), shows that Jesus received the information sometime after the rumour reached the Pharisees, not at the same time as the Pharisees heard it, which would have been the case if Jesus supernaturally acquired that information. Secondly, the passive inflexive ἔγνων (got to know, learned or discovered) is an uncharacteristic way of describing a supernatural acquisition of information.¹⁵ Thirdly, repetition of the name, ‘Jesus’ in the verse indicates that the fourth evangelist quotes the rumour verbatim (so the NRSV).¹⁶ The general indication from John 4:1, therefore, is that Jesus acquired the vital information through insiders, information which was pivotal to his decision to suspend his mission (Carson 1991:215; Moloney 1998:116).

A second example is in John 7:19 where Jesus accused the Judeans¹⁷ of ‘looking for an opportunity to kill me’. The immediate context of the verse could, on first reading, suggest that Jesus was merely making the point that in accusing him of blasphemously leading people astray; his

clandestine withdrawals of Jesus in Matt 4:12; 12:15; 14:13; 15:21; Mark 3:7; Luke 9:10; 22:4.

¹⁵ Elsewhere in the gospel, John uses the more active γινώσκειν (to know) and ἐγίνωσκεν (he was knowing; 2:24–25), to describe Jesus’ supernatural knowledge (γινώσκεις—you know in Jn 1:48; or γνοῦς—having known in John 5:6 and 6:15 or ἤδει—he had known in John 13:11; εἰδώς—to know through seeing John 18:4).

¹⁶ For discussion of the textual problems on this, see Barrett 1978:230.

¹⁷ It is not clear whether the accusation was directed at the authorities among the crowd or the crowd as a whole. The two are earlier in 7:11–13, and later in 7:25–26, distinguished from each other, but not in 7:19. Given the surprised response and denial in 7:20, we must probably take it that Jesus was declaring to the crowd that he was aware of the plot by the authorities to kill him.

audience were charging him with heresy worthy of the death penalty (cf. Deut 13:1–18; 18:9–14), a charge about which more will be said in the next section. However, given the ‘continuing ground bass’ of assassination plots against Jesus in the whole chapter (Beasley-Murray 1987:106), it must be taken that Jesus was accusing them of the specific plot to kill him. And indeed a specific plot had been hatched against him for breaking the Sabbath during Jesus’ previous visit to Jerusalem in John 5:18.¹⁸

In that case, it is worth enquiring how Jesus got to know about these plots, for the crowd to whom he directed the accusation denied knowledge of such plots. One can only conjecture. However, the likelihood that this privileged information came to Jesus via a sympathiser from within the opponents’ camp where the plot was hatched cannot be dismissed.

Another example is in John 9:35, where the evangelist reports that Jesus ἤκουσεν (heard) that the healed blind man had been excommunicated from the synagogue. Given that the information would not have been a privileged one, it is possible that anyone who got to know about the excommunication could have conveyed the news to Jesus. All the same, one possible, if not likely, source of the news could be a sympathiser from among the authorities.

A final example is described in John 11:53–54 following the official resolution to arrest and kill Jesus by the court of the Sanhedrin. Without indicating how Jesus got to know about this resolution, John simply states that as a result, ‘Jesus therefore no longer walked about openly

¹⁸ The similarities between John 5:18 and Mark 3:6 buttress the point that the first plot to eliminate Jesus occurred quite early in his ministry, giving ample opportunities for the information to be leaked to Jesus by an insider sympathiser (cf. Lincoln 2005:198–199).

among the Jews' but withdrew to the wilderness. Even though a miraculous means of knowing the resolution is not impossible, the most likely means would have been through a sympathetic insider from the Sanhedrin. Carson (1991:423) is correct: 'A large council is unlikely to be secure especially if there are sympathizers in it. So it is unsurprising that Jesus found out about the Sanhedrin's decision'. It is thus evident that Jesus' mission regularly benefitted from insider information from his opponents. Could not some of the crypto-disciples have served as agents who conveyed secret information to Jesus?

3.3. Jesus' cryptic language in John's gospel

A third feature of Jesus' crypto-behaviour in John's gospel is the nature of some of his speeches and statements. As already noted above, this was a general feature of Johannine characters that employ covert verbal strategies ranging from information control, evasive speech, rumours, and differences in public-private discourses. The same may be said of Jesus in John's gospel. A classic example of this feature is in Jesus' evasiveness, or at best ambiguous pronouncements before the Sanhedrin in John 18:19–23, and especially before Pilate in John 18:33–40 leading to the latter's evident frustration. As explained by Hanson and Oakman (1998:94), 'It does appear that Jesus' ambiguous answer [to both courts], which plays a role in all of the accounts, fits both his way of dealing with direct challenges (as seen in many of the Gospel dialogues) and his skepticism that any sort of straight answer would satisfy these authorities'. In other words, Jesus adopted evasiveness in these situations as a way of subverting his interrogators.

At other times, Jesus' statements were deliberately cryptic, and certainly confusing to his listeners. A typical example is Jesus' statement in 7:33–34 (cf. 8:21–22) directed at the temple police who were mandated to arrest him, but uttered in the hearing of the gathered

crowd: ‘I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will search for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come’. Though referring to his death, this was ‘enigmatically’ (Morris 1995:370) rendered as he did not want to make his prediction too plain at this stage of his mission. It is unsurprising, therefore, that it resulted in confusion among the crowd (John 7:36), and ultimately led to the temple police aborting his arrest (7:45). What was plainly a theological statement to insiders was rendered in a cryptic manner so as to result in disarming his opponents.

Another category of clandestine statements by Jesus is his use of metaphors (e.g. 5:35; 6:41; 8:34–36; 11:9–10), ironies or *double entendres* (e.g. 3:3; 7:6; 14:2; 18:5–6), riddles (e.g. 3:8; 4:10; 4:37; 5:19–20; 9:4) and indeed parables (e.g. 4:35–38; 10:1–6, 11–18; 12:24–26; 15:1–4; 16:20–21) in the Gospel (Dodd 1963:366–387; Richard 1985:96–112; Van der Watt 2004:463–481). Though this is an area of apparent divergence between the fourth gospel and the synoptics, all four gospels are in agreement that Jesus’ use of such verbal devices served crucial functions, including differentiating outsiders from insiders. As he told his disciples in Mark 4:11, ‘To you has been given the *secret* of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables’ a statement which finds resonance in John 16:29.¹⁹ It is unsurprising then that on several occasions in John’s gospel the result of Jesus’ use of such verbal devices among his hearers was exasperation (10:24), desertions by some ‘disciples’ (6:66) and, indeed, attempted stoning by the crowd (8:59).

This is not to claim that Jesus was always secretive and cryptic in his pronouncements, far from it. Indeed, while defending himself before the

¹⁹ For a discussion of the question of parables in John’s gospel, see Zimmermann, (2011:243–276).

Sanhedrin, he rejected any notion that he was a secretive preacher: ‘I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. *I have said nothing in secret*’ (18:20–21). In other words, his message was in the public domain. But that accurate answer in itself was uttered as part of Jesus’ covert strategy of defence before the Sanhedrin, for though accurate, it was nevertheless evasive and deflected the Sanhedrin’s interest in his disciples and thus protecting them (Lincoln 2005:454; Witherington 1995:288). It also enabled Jesus to avoid incriminating himself to the Sanhedrin, as the correct legal procedure was for them to interrogate the prosecuting witnesses, and not the defendant as they were doing (Bultmann 1971:646; Carson 1991:584).

It is therefore evident that Jesus spoke in a manner that each context mandated. As he told his disciples, his choice of covert verbal devices was deliberate: ‘I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The *hour* is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father (John 16:25). As I demonstrate in the next section, the concept of ‘the hour’ played an important role in shaping Jesus’ use of cryptic language and conduct.

4. Jesus’ Specific Crypto-behaviour in John 7:1–13

John 7:1–13 is a key passage in the gospel, as it is placed at the head of a long section of four chapters covering Jesus’ second of three mission trips to Jerusalem (Attridge 1980:160–170; Keener 2003:701; Lincoln 2005:241; Witherington 1995:164). Though the constituent episodes of John 7–10 superficially appear disjointed, they are cohesively woven together into a coherent whole by three thematic concerns,²⁰ namely,

²⁰ Cory (1997:95–116) has also suggested that the first part of this section of the Gospel (John 7–8) is coherently woven together by the theological theme of

(a) the Jewish festivals and their symbols serving as backdrop—Tabernacles 7:1–10:21 and Hanukkah 10:22–42, (b) Jesus’ conflict with the unbelieving world leading to threats on his life (7:1, 19, 25, 30, 32, 44; 8:37, 40, 59; 9:34; 10:10, 20, 31, 39–40), and (c) Jesus’ consequent crypto-behaviour in that context (7:1–4, 10, 44; 8:20–21, 59; 10:6, 31–33, 39). All three themes are concentrated in 7:1–13, which thus serves as thematic summary of, or in Bultmann’s (1971:287; Card 2014; Lindars 1972; Moloney 1998:232–237) words, ‘the introduction to the whole complex; it prepares the way for Jesus’ appearance in Jerusalem at the feast of Tabernacles’.

For our purposes, John 7:1–13 is crucial to a full understanding of the Gospel’s approach to secrecy, as the passage shines a rare light on Jesus’ covert conduct in the privacy of his relationship with his brothers. It thus provides an excellent instance for ascertaining the fourth evangelist’s point of view with regard to clandestine conduct by characters. Moreover, as will later emerge, there are significant parallels between John 7:1–13 and how Nicodemus is portrayed at the end of the chapter. The examination of this passage will likely therefore yield a number of helpful criteria for the subsequent examination. To what extent did the context of intimidation reflect in Jesus’ conduct? What explanations and motivations does he offer in the defence of such conduct, if any? And in that respect how does it help decipher the evangelist’s attitude to covert conduct by Johannine characters?

‘Wisdom’s rescue’, while Witherington (1995:168–169) has proposed that the section is summed up by the judicial theme of ‘Jesus on trial’. Indeed, this first half is framed by the two verbal markers ἐν κρυπτῷ (in secret; 7:4) and ἐκρυβῆ (was hidden; 8:59), a fact that also underlines the importance of the secrecy motif in the section (Dodd 1963:345–354; Keener 2003:703). This coherence appears, however, to be broken by the *pericope adulterae* (7:53–8:11), even though several scholars have identified ways

The passage divides itself into five sub-sections, namely, (a) Jesus' covert withdrawal from public 7:1–2, (b) his brothers' proposal for publicity 7:3–5, (c) his cryptic response to his brothers 7:6–8, (d) his secret attendance at the festival 7:9–10, and (e) secret whispers about Jesus by crypto-disciples at the festival 7:11–13. As I also show, each of the first four sub-sections furnishes a criterion for determining John's attitude to crypto-behaviour, and together with the final sub-section provide a test-case for validating these four criteria.

4.1. Jesus' covert withdrawal from public John 7:1–2

The passage begins by describing the intimidating setting which served as background to Jesus' conduct at this point of his mission. Jesus, we are told, restricted his movements to Galilee οὐ γὰρ ἠθέληεν ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ περιπατεῖν (for he did not wish to walk about in Judea). In other words, he avoided public appearances in Judea at this point, because, 'they were seeking to kill Him' (7:1).²¹ This danger no doubt refers to the earlier threat on his life in Judea (5:18), insider information of which, as suggested above, likely reached Jesus in a covert fashion.

After a period of 'one year of ministry on which the synoptists focus most of their attention' (Carson 1991:305; cf. Bultmann 1971:290 n.1), Jesus eventually removed the restrictions on his movements and went to

in which that text fits into this logical flow, for which discussion, see Baum (2014:163–178), Keith, (2009) and Punch (2010).

²¹ A minority of manuscripts, namely, W, a, b, cur, Chrysostom, and Augustine (Aland and Others 2005:341) have the passive, οὐ γὰρ εἶχεν ἐξουσίαν ('for He was not authorized' or 'for He was not able to') instead of the active, οὐ γὰρ ἠθέληεν ('for He did not wish'). Almost all translations and commentaries prefer the latter majority rendition, even though Barrett's (1978:309–310) fourfold argument in favour of the minority rendition is worth considering. Both renditions indicate the manner in which the hostilities were reflected in Jesus' conduct, and that Jesus acted covertly only in conformity with his divine mission.

the dangerous place anyway, even if ‘in secret’ (7:10). There is therefore no suggestion that this and other withdrawals from public were due to Jesus being afraid of his opponents. Evidently, however, Jesus’ conduct was always shaped by his commitment to obey his Father, and complete his mission (4:34; 9:4; 11:9), and hence he avoided unnecessary danger, if such danger threatened his fulfilment of that mission at that time.²² John’s matter-of-fact description of this context and Jesus’ covert response to it is, therefore, one criterion for determining the evangelist’s attitude to secrecy by a Johannine disciple. The conduct of the Johannine disciple will need to be evaluated in the light of the immediate danger and whether the response remains in conformity with Jesus’ mission as portrayed by the gospel.

While this criterion may appear to be uncontroversial, it is seldom applied by commentators in the evaluation of the crypto-disciples in the Gospel. For example, interpreters frequently assert that the fourth evangelist censured covert conduct resulting from φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων (fear of the Jews). Bennema’s (2009:193; cf. Keener 2003:1160) evaluation is typical: ‘When belief in Jesus is coloured by a fear of people’s responses, the result is secrecy or anonymity—a failure to make a public confession of that belief. This, according to John is inadequate. John advocates that people profess their belief openly, even when fear of persecution is a reality’. This view is generally correct, for Jesus’ assurances to his disciples not to be afraid (e.g. 6:20; 14:27),

²² In his ‘two-level drama’ reading of the gospel, Martyn, (1968:58–60) suggests that 7:1 reflects the situation of writing of the gospel when some quarters of Jerusalem were so hostile to the Johannine Christians that they avoided those precincts. Martyn’s suggestion is to be rightly rejected on historical grounds, but he certainly is right in highlighting the possibility that the earliest readers of the gospel would have applied 7:1 in similar hostile contexts. The avoidance of danger by a disciple is in itself not to be viewed as cowardly, except when such avoidance was not in conformity with Jesus’ mission.

certainly underlines the potential for fear to negatively affect a disciple's witness, especially when such fear resulted in conduct not in conformity with Jesus. Even so, and as I shortly argue below, fear in the face of the hostilities in itself is not characterised negatively by John, except in situations in which such fear resulted in speech and actions that did not conform to Jesus' mission.

4.2. Jesus' brothers' proposal for publicity 7:3–5

John then describes a clearly tense and uncomfortable conversation between Jesus and his brothers in which they make a three-point proposal to Jesus, each with its motivation, (a) that Jesus abandons his restriction and heads for Judea for the sake of his disciples 7:3, (b) that Jesus' crypto-behaviour undermined his supposed desire for publicity 7:4a, and (c) that his miraculous works demanded that he took the stage in the capital, and 'manifest yourself (φανερώσον) to the world' 7:4b. Interpreters' assessment of this proposal is understandably negative, if even existing in a spectrum of degrees, ranging from Barrett's (1978:308; cf. Bultmann 1971:291) labelling it as 'foolish' and a naïve misunderstanding of Jesus' mission, through Keener's (2003:706) middle-of-the-road 'sound political advice', to Witherington's (1995:170; cf. Brown 1966:308) scathing description of the brothers as 'baiting Jesus to go up to Jerusalem...Their attitude seems either to be one of jealousy of Jesus, or they viewed Jesus as on some sort of ego trip'. Whichever slant is placed on it, the brothers' demand was essentially echoed by Jesus' opponents in 10:24, thus thoroughly placing them in a negative light.

Though resonating with the demands of Jesus' opponents, the brothers' proposal does not, however, amount to full-blown intimidation of Jesus, certainly not to the degree in which Jesus' followers were threatened by his opponents, as for example in 5:9–13. Even so, the nature of the

conversation betrays a less-than-friendly comportment of the brothers, and indeed ‘conflict’ (Keener 2003:704) with Jesus, at least in his conduct of his mission. John’s qualification in 7:5 that ‘not even his brothers believed’ in him, definitely adds weight to the view that the setting was one in which Jesus was faced with opposition in his own home. The brothers didn’t reckon that his divine mission required him to live only by God’s imperative, for his ‘destiny was not popularity, but the hatred of the world’ (Barrett 1978:309; cf. Morris 1995:350–351). This hostile context demanded discretion in Jesus’ response.²³

With regard to criteria for determining the evangelist’s attitude to secrecy, therefore, it is evident that contrary to the brothers’ view, John, would have regarded the alternation of publicity (παρρησία) with secrecy (κρυπτῶ) in a disciple’s conduct as perfectly compatible, so long as such secrecy fulfilled other criteria, namely Jesus’ mission. This criterion may be conversely stated, that in a hostile context, fulfilment of Jesus’ mission may mandate a Johannine character’s discretion and covert action so long as such discretion is temporary and conforms to that mission. This criterion is fully substantiated by the next sub-section of the passage to which we now turn.

4.3. Jesus’ cryptic response to his brothers’ proposal 7:6–8

Jesus’ response to his brothers in 7:6 furnishes a third guiding criterion for determining acceptable covert behaviour by a Johannine disciple: ‘My time is not yet present, (ὁ καιρὸς ὁ ἐμὸς οὐπω πάρεστιν), but your

²³ Beasley-Murray’s (1987:106) suggestion that there is a ‘concurrence’ of the brothers’ proposal with the Tempter’s in Matt 4:5–7 is perhaps overly negative, but nevertheless reflects the realities of Jesus’ constant conflict with the ‘world’. Keener (2003:705) also insightfully notes that Jesus’ brothers ‘serve a literary function in the narrative, challenging disciples to have deeper faith and to endure rejection by their families, a common early Christian situation’.

time is always prepared (John 7:6; cf. 7:8)'. In other words, for Jesus, there was an appointed time, a *καιρὸς*, for manifesting himself, which was different from that of the world. This answer fits into a consistent theological fabric of John's gospel which describes Jesus' mission in relation to a specific hour, and distinguishes Jesus' *καιρὸς* or *ῥα* from the world's (e.g. 2:4; 5:25, 28; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23–27; 13:1). In Schnackenberg's (1968–1982:422) words, Jesus operated 'under the law of the hour'. In most cases in John's Gospel, this *καιρὸς* or *ῥα* referred to 'His passion, glorification and human redemption' (Morrison, 2005; cf. Mark 14:35, 41; Matt 26:45; Luke 22:53; 1 Macc 9:10; Daise, 2007; Keener 1993:507–509). In this answer, therefore, Jesus employs a *double entendre* to distance himself from his unbelieving brothers, for the word *καιρὸς* (time) simultaneously referred to the time for attending the festival, as well as the time of his death. As already argued *double entendres* were one category of cryptic verbal devices adopted by Jesus in hostile situations.

The use of covert verbal devices is also exemplified in Jesus' statement in 7:8 where he indicated that he would not 'go up to this festival because my time is not yet arrived'. A long-running scholarly debate continues to rage as to whether Jesus lied to his brothers (so Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998:143–145; Neyrey 1998:87), or that he indicated that that he was not *yet* able to go with his brothers, so they could leave without him (so, Barrett 1978:313; Keener 2003:708; Moloney 1998:238). Given Jesus' consistent use of the concept of being 'lifted up' or 'going up' in John's Gospel to describe his death and ascension (3:13–14; 6:62; 20:17), *ἀναβαίνω* could either be idiomatically understood as meaning Jesus was travelling to Jerusalem, or metaphorically as Jesus was indicating his forthcoming death in Jerusalem.

I share the latter view that the *double entendre* use of ἀναβαίνω (go up), the emphatic qualification, ταύτην placed after ἑορτὴν (festival, meaning, *this particular festival*), as well as the distinction made between Jesus' καὶρὸς and that of his brothers, all indicate that Jesus was saying that he was not joining his brothers for this journey. In other words, the brothers would have taken it that Jesus was not attending the whole festival, while Jesus simply meant that he was following a divine programme and not theirs. Regardless of which view is taken, however, almost all interpreters agree that Jesus' answer to his brothers was ambiguous.²⁴

As previously argued, ambiguous language was a key tool employed by anti-society to evade attention from outsiders (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998:142). The more pressing question, then, is in what way did John view Jesus' καὶρὸς or ὥρα in relation to other characters? In answer to this question, it is evident that on one level, the καὶρὸς or ὥρα is related to Jesus alone as it identified his death and glorification. However, on another level, it is emphasised in the whole gospel that believers in Jesus participate in a general sense in this inaugurated eschatology. So for example, Jesus points out to the Samaritan woman in 4:21–23 that 'the ὥρα (hour) is coming' when God will be worshipped in truth and in spirit. Similarly, Jesus warned the disciples that an hour (ὥρα) will

²⁴ Almost all, but not every interpreter takes it that Jesus' answer is ambiguous. Bultmann (1971:289) for example argues that if ambiguous, then Jesus would 'have deliberately deceived his brothers, who in this situation could not but understand his words in the way they did'. He instead proposes solving the problem by viewing it as a miracle story akin to Jn 2:1–11. A number of manuscripts (e.g. P⁶⁶, P⁷⁵, B W Θ, pesh hl sah) contain the qualification οὐπω before ἀναβαίνω, suggesting that Jesus said that he was not *yet* going to the festival (so also New Century Version, NKJV, WEB, Young's Literal; Webster). The authenticity of this textual tradition is debated, some such as Barrett (1978:312) think it was a 'certainly wrong' attempt to eliminate the difficulty, while others, such as Keener (2003:708 n.47) think the arguments for its 'originality, however, are stronger than often noticed'.

arrive when the persecution and martyrdom of believers would be considered as a worshipful act by the perpetrators (John 16:2; cf. 16:21, 25, 32; 17:1). So, it must be taken that, with regard to Johannine characters, covert speech and conduct that accorded with Jesus' appointed *καιρὸς* or *ᾠρα* would not have been viewed negatively by the evangelist, especially when they fulfilled the other criteria. To put this criterion more positively, ambiguous statements and covert conduct may reflect positively on a character if such ambiguity helps fulfil the mission of Jesus in its proper timing (*καιρὸς* or *ᾠρα*).²⁵

4.4. Jesus' secret attendance at the festival 7:9–10

The fourth sub-section indicates that Jesus eventually went to the festival, *οὐ φανερώς, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐν κρυπτῷ* (not openly, but as in secret 7:10). In other words, he went not as his brothers proposed, but in the manner which was in conformity with his mission. It portrays 'Jesus' firm resolve to do exactly what the Father gives him to do, and at the Father's time' (Carson 1991:309; cf. 5:19–29; Barrett 1978:313; Lincoln 2005:245). Given the backdrop of danger in Jerusalem, and his knowledge of the plot to kill him (5:18), it is unsurprising that Jesus remained in his secrecy for the first part of the festival until the middle session when he went to the temple to openly teach (7:14). This was evidently in line with the previous criteria in which alternation of

²⁵ The logical corollary of this criterion is that it reflects negatively on a Johannine character, if the character hurts Jesus' mission by failing to employ ambiguity when ambiguous statement would have sufficed in a particular instance. However, I am unable to locate enough evidence in the current passage to support adopting this albeit logical criterion. However, such evidence appears to me to exist with respect to the indiscreet conduct of the healed leper of Mark 1:40–45 whose unambiguous broadcast of Jesus' healing led to Jesus' premature flight to the desert. Given the concurrence of John's secrecy motif with Mark's Messianic secret, this criterion would therefore not have been farfetched in the Johannine context (cf. Watson 2010).

secrecy with openness was regarded by the evangelist as acceptable conduct in the hostile context.

4.5. Secret whispers about Jesus by crypto-disciples at the festival 7:11–13

At the festival, there were considerable rumours, or as Schnackenburg (1968–1982:143) puts it, immense ‘undercover talk’ about Jesus. This again underlines the hostile context of the passage, and, indeed, because of this context of φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων (the fear of the Jews), the festival attendees, evidently including those who believed in him, avoided openly speaking about Jesus. Our passage therefore closes with a brief reference to covert conduct of crypto-disciples in a hostile context, disciples who did not openly bear witness to Jesus, but rather resorted to γογγυσμὸς (whispering or speaking discreetly; cf. BADG 204; Morris 1995:356).

This leads to the question as to how the evangelist may have regarded the covert conduct of these crypto-disciples who only bore witness in secret. In other words, taking the criteria outlined above, what are we to make of John’s attitude to the crypto-disciples of 7:12–13? To start with, most interpreters regard the whispers of these crypto-disciples as merely ‘sympathetic’ speculations on Jesus (Beasley-Murray 1987:107), or even indicating ‘an awareness of his character and a lack of perception of his Person’ (Morris 1995:356), but certainly not betraying any ‘profound’ faith in Jesus (Carson 1991:309). However, when read in the light of Second Temple Jewish reflections on the subject²⁶ and specifically on the gospel’s vocabulary on ‘goodness’

²⁶ See for example, Josephus (*Antiquities* 4.67; 10.188; 15.373), *Tobit* (7.6; 9.6), 2 *Maccabees* (15:12), 4 *Maccabees* (1.10; 3.18; 4.1; 11.22; 13.25; 15.9). Jesus’ statement in Markk 10:18: ‘No one is good but God alone’ underlines that the whisper by the Johannine crypto-disciples that He is good’ cannot be dismissed as mere

(especially καλός and ἀγαθός; 1:46; 2:10; 7:18; 10:11, 14–16, 32–33, 41), this cryptic whispering of ἀγαθός ἐστίν (‘He is good’), presumably within the tents and booths spread across Jerusalem, was indeed profound, for it was secret witness to Jesus’ oneness with the Father.

The counter-claim that Jesus was ‘deceiving the crowd’; in other words, he was leading people astray, was certainly meant to accuse Jesus of the grave theological crime of blasphemous heresy. This is especially so as this charge directly evokes the language of Deuteronomy 13:6–18 where the sentence for the ‘secret’ heretic deception of God’s people was the death penalty. Indeed, the Pharisees repeat this counter-charge ‘He is deceiving the crowd’ (cf. 7:47) within the gathering of the Sanhedrin, underlining its gravity. This counter-claim therefore indicates that the statement by the crypto-disciples that ἀγαθός ἐστίν (He is good) is an equally profound one.²⁷ To put this point another way, the counter-claim suggests that the whisper that ‘He is good’ was of the same profound level as the charge of heresy. As Heath (2010:528; cf. Howard-Brook 2003:177) has convincingly argued, “‘He is good’ cannot be uttered lightly in this context, for though it testifies to this-worldly attractiveness and personal relationship to God, it is also dangerous. For the Jews who confess “‘He is good”, there is a risk that they are (or will be perceived to be) putting their faith in a person who is “leading astray” and who therefore deserves stoning, together with his followers’. The passage therefore closes by highlighting that Jesus’

sympathetic speculation devoid of profound theological claims, certainly if it is taken, as several scholars do, that John knew Mark and wrote assuming also that his readers knew Mark’s gospel (Anderson 2013:197–245; Smalley, 2012).

²⁷ Apart from the NKJV and Young’s, most English translations miss this profoundness by rendering ἀγαθός ἐστίν as ‘He is a good man’ (so, NIV; KJV; ESV; RSV; NRSV; ASV; GNT; NASB; NLT; Amp). Darby rightly supplies square brackets: ‘He is [a] good [man]’ to indicate its slanted interpretation.

secret conduct of his mission was paralleled by covert witness by some in Jerusalem. The crypto-disciples of John 7:12–13 therefore fulfil the first two criteria for christomorphicity.

They also fulfil a fourth criterion, with the evangelist’s reference to φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων (fear of the Jews) in 7:13. Some interpreters take it that this phrase occurring for the first of four occasions in the Gospel (7:13; 9:22; 19:38; 20:19) censures the whispering witness of the crypto-disciples in a negative manner. So according to Keener (2003:711) for example, ‘John did not regard this response to Jesus as adequate discipleship (12:42–43)’. This judgement is, however, premature, for the φόβον word group is more generally employed in the Gospel to describe the intimidating context (BDAG 1062) rather than censure the characters. Indeed, the only occurrence in the LXX of the term φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων, in Esther 8:17, is in a positive manner. While John does not use the phrase in this positive sense, there is no reason to *prima facie* take his use to explain the behaviour of the blind man’s parents in 9:22, to qualify Joseph of Arimathea in 19:38 and to explain why the disciples locked themselves behind closed doors in 20:19, as a censure. On all occasions the phrase neutrally describes the hostile contexts shaping covert conduct of the characters.

Moreover, the not uncommon cross-linkage of the phrase φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων, as in 7:13, with the statement in 12:42–43 where the evangelist censures those among the authorities who failed to bear witness, unfortunately obscures a significant difference between the two contexts. In the first place φόβον τῶν Ἰουδαίων is not explicitly used in 12:42–43, even though John certainly explains that the failure of those crypto-disciples to bear witness was διὰ τοὺς Φαρισαίους (because of the Pharisees). While ‘fear’ may correctly describe this reluctance to

bear witness, it does not necessarily belong to the same category as what is implied by the term φόβον τῶν Ιουδαίων.²⁸

Secondly John's censure in 12:42–43 is much more reflected in his charge that those crypto-disciples among the authorities 'loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God'. Indeed, a similarly negative assessment of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem in 5:42–44 indicates that, to the fourth evangelist, love for God's glory, a theological notion which indeed is closely bound up with Jesus' death, and *καρὸς* or *ῥα* (12:16, 23, 27–28; cf. 13:1, 32), constituted a key test of genuine discipleship. True disciples will testify that they have seen this glory in the son (1:14), while those who are not will seek human glory (Caird, 1968–1969:265–277; Cook, 1984:291–297; Van der Merwe, 2002:226–249). This does not describe the crypto-disciples of 7:12–13.

Accordingly, rather than censuring a crypto-disciple, fear of the authorities in the immediate context of threat to life does not necessarily reflect negatively on a Johannine character, except when such fear resulted in behaviour not in conformity with Jesus' mission. It must therefore be concluded that the crypto-disciples of John 7:12–13 are not censured by John in the manner that some assume.

4.5. Summary of criteria for identifying John's attitude to secret conduct

The above exegesis of John 7:1–13 has furnished four helpful criteria to be employed in establishing the evangelist's attitude to specific

²⁸ This obscurity is unfortunately repeated by several translations which introduce the word 'fear' into 12:42 (e.g. NIV, NRSV, ESV, NASB, NCV) but the NKJV's 'because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue' (so also ASV) is more accurate.

instances of crypto-behaviour of a Johannine disciple. Firstly, covert conduct must be evaluated in the light of the immediate danger faced by the character, and whether the response remains in conformity with Jesus' mission as portrayed by the gospel. Secondly, a character's conformity to Jesus' mission in a hostile context may mandate that character's covert action or ambiguous speech so long as such discretion is temporary. Thirdly, such covert conduct which accords with Jesus' appointed *καίρως* or *ᾠρα* would not have been censured by the evangelist. And finally, in the immediate context of threat to life, fear of the authorities does not necessarily reflect negatively on the crypto-disciple, unless such fear resulted in behaviour not in conformity with Jesus' mission. Having tested these criteria with regard to the crypto-disciples identified in 7:12–13, I now apply them to examine whether the evangelist censures the conduct of Nicodemus in the Sanhedrin recorded in John 7.

5. Nicodemus as a Crypto-disciple in John 7:45–52

With the notable exception of Brown (1979:72 n.128) almost all interpreters regard Nicodemus as one of the Johannine crypto-disciples, at least at some stage of the Gospel narrative. His close collaboration with Joseph of Arimathea, the explicitly labelled crypto-disciple (19:38), the twice repeated statement that he came to Jesus during the night (3:2; 19:39), the twice repeated introduction by the evangelist that he was one of the Jewish leaders (3:1; 7:50; cf. 12:42) and his devotional acts of participation in Jesus' burial (19:38–42) all patently mark Nicodemus out as a crypto-disciple.²⁹ Though he appears on three

²⁹ Brown objects that the term crypto-disciple should be narrowly limited to those explicitly identified in John 12:42–43 and thus 'disagree with those who treat Nicodemus as a crypto-Christian' (1979:72 n.128). But his approach is too restrictive given the manner in which John himself uses the term *μαθητής* (disciple) to describe

occasions in the narrative, namely, 3:1–10, 7:45–52 and 19:39–42, scholars are most divided in their assessment of the evangelist's portrayal of the character in 7:45–52.³⁰ Accordingly, and given also the fact that this passage occurs within the same section of the gospel governed by 7:1–13, a closer examination of the account using the above criteria for Christomorphicity will prove illuminating.

The passage recounts the schismatic consequences within the Sanhedrin of the temple police's failure to arrest Jesus and, as I now show, bears several similarities with 7:1-13. It divides itself into five sub-sections, namely (a) the police report on Jesus 7:45–46, (b) the Pharisees' threatening response to the report 7:47–49, (c) John's evocative introduction of Nicodemus 7:50, (d) Nicodemus' challenge to the Sanhedrin 7:51, and (e) the Sanhedrin's rebuke of Nicodemus 7:52.

those who show any sign of devotion to Jesus. The identification of a Johannine character as a crypto-disciple must similarly be guided by the evangelist.

³⁰ Scholars mostly take it that 3:1–10 characterises Nicodemus as at best an ambiguous personality seeking spiritual encounter with Jesus (Barrett 1978:204–205; Bassler 1989:635–646; Bennema 2009:79; Bruce 1983:81; Bultmann 1971:133; Carson 1991:185–186; de Jonge 1971:635; Keener 2003:536; Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998:81; Renz 2006:255–283). Some further argue that the preceding John 2:23–25 serve to introduce Nicodemus as one of the untrustworthy disciples (e.g. Bennema 2009:79; de Jonge 1971:345), but against this view, is the adversative ἢν δὲ ἄνθρωπος (3:1; so Darby Translation's more accurate rendering 'But a man') distinguishes Nicodemus from the untrustworthy disciples of in 2:23–35 (cf. Bruce 1983:81; Carson 1991:185). It would appear, therefore, that Nicodemus came to Jesus not as fully-fledged believer even though one to be entrusted with Jesus' word which resulted in him becoming a believer. By contrast, a majority of scholars regard Nicodemus' characterisation in Jn 19 as positive, even though, a few are of the opinion that he is negatively portrayed (e.g. Beck 1997:69; Culpepper 1983:136; de Jonge 1971; Esler and Piper 2006:72–73; Freyne, 1985:117–143; Martyn 1968; Meeks 1985:93–115)

5.1. The police report on Jesus 7:45–46

The passage begins with the report from the temple police who were previously instructed to arrest Jesus (7:32). They failed to do so, because ‘no one laid hands on him’ (7:44), maybe by slipping through their hands as he previously did in 5:13, or simply that the police were too stunned into impotence, or even Bulmann’s miraculous interpretation that ‘as if their hands were tied’ (1971:306). Whichever was the manner of Jesus’ escape, having failed to arrest him, the police instead returned to the Sanhedrin and reported their findings: ‘Never has anyone spoken like this’ (7:46; cf. 4:42). Otherwise stated, ‘the speech of Jesus is not the speech of a man’ (Barrett 1978:331; cf. Mark 1:22; 12:17; Matt 7:28–29; Beasley-Murray 1987:119).

The police’s report was thus not just about their failure, and in fact did not mention the hostilities among the crowd, which would have provided them with a mitigating reason why they failed to arrest Jesus. Instead what they offer as report amounted to a testimony about Jesus: ‘Never has anyone spoken like this’. As Morris (1995:382) puts it, ‘this must have taken some courage, since they must have known that it would expose them to the rebuke (and the disciplinary action) of the Sanhedrin’. Under the same hostile circumstances, Nicodemus will shortly also discreetly echo the verdict of the police in his statement in 7:51; but for now, it is enough to observe that this first sub-section indicates the hostile context which underlines the passage, and the courage it demanded. The Sanhedrin, having resolved earlier to have Jesus killed, are now thwarted from arresting Jesus.

5.2. The Pharisees’ threatening response to the report 7:47–49

The response of the Pharisees to the evidently positive report on Jesus was frustration. They were irritated, not just by the continued spread of

the fame of Jesus in Jerusalem but even more so by the inability of their police to arrest Jesus. Their threatening riposte to the testimony is in three parts which together indicate the nature of the dangerous context, namely, (a) that by their report, the police were already led astray 7:47, (b) they overconfidently assert that not ‘one of the authorities or of the Pharisees’ had believed in Jesus 7:48, and (c) that the ignorant crowd profess faith in Jesus because they were under Jesus’ spell 7:49.

The first statement no doubt betrays the Pharisees’ previously conceived judgement charging Jesus with the heretic deception of the false prophet of Deuteronomy 13:6–18 and thus worthy of the death penalty. The police’s failure to arrest him, but instead to bear testimony on behalf of Jesus was thus a grave warning to the Pharisees. Their riposte then amounts not only to shouting down and shutting up the police lest they are condemned along with Jesus. It was also a not too subtle warning to other members of the Sanhedrin that any attempt to defend Jesus would face the same consequences. Nicodemus would shortly defy such intimidation and rather urge on them that they were wrong to ‘question the competence of those who heard Jesus firsthand (7:46) without hearing from Jesus themselves (7:51)’ (Keener 2003:732).

Some interpreters rightly argue that the second assertion by the Pharisees is a classic example of Johannine irony which thus places the Pharisees in further negative light (Carson 1991:331; Lincoln 2015:259; Renz 2006:255–283). Yet at the level of the story itself, their rhetorical question, ‘Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him?’ also betrays the Pharisees’ bullying attempt to enforce uniform adherence to their point of view within the Sanhedrin. It was a threatening gauntlet to all membership of the Sanhedrin, both the

ἀρχόντων (rulers) and the Φαρισαίων (Pharisees), to publicly declare their hands and denounce Jesus.

Similarly, the final statement: ‘this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed’, does not just smack of Pharisaic elitism (so Keener 2003:731), or their snobby ‘abuse’ (so Beasley-Murray 1987:120) of ordinary people. More than that, it betrayed the Pharisees’ bullying attitude to any expression of sympathy with Jesus, let alone belief in him. Anyone who dared to utter a defence of Jesus was in effect not just being labelled as ignorant, but also as ‘accursed’. Put together then, the Pharisees’ threatening riposte to the police report was not just hostile to the police, but was calculated to breathe hostile threats to any member of the Sanhedrin who dared to differ in their assessment of Jesus. It was in this hostile context that Nicodemus dared to differ and speak up.

5.3. John’s evocative introduction of Nicodemus 7:50

John’s introduction reminds his readers that Nicodemus had previously gone to Jesus and was εἷς ὢν ἐξ αὐτῶν (one from among them; John 7:50). Several interpreters take this introduction as stressing that at this point Nicodemus must be regarded as still one of Jesus’ opponents. So according to Lincoln (2005:259; cf., Brant, 2004:191; de Jonge 1971:341) for example, Nicodemus here ‘continues to be designated as “one of them” and not “a disciple of Jesus who was also a Pharisee and Jewish leader”’.

Yet, when taken in its immediate literary context and in direct relation to the statement that precedes it, which it must, εἷς ὢν ἐξ αὐτῶν in fact sheds favourable light on Nicodemus. For, it serves as an ironic rebuttal of the boast of the Pharisees. They claimed that none from among them had ‘believed in [Jesus]’ (John 7:48), to which the evangelist replies,

Nicodemus, ‘who was one of them’, spoke up to counter their false confidence. It is indeed in the same distinguishing sense that Nicodemus is introduced in 3:1, even though 7:50 lacks the $\delta\epsilon$ (but) of 3:1. Certainly, in John’s ironic construction, Nicodemus is meant to be seen by this introduction to be an exception to the rulers and Pharisees of 7:48, and not in cahoots with them.

Furthermore, the use of $\acute{\omicron}$ $\epsilon\lambda\theta\acute{\omicron}\nu$ (the one having come) to characterise Nicodemus’ coming to Jesus, instead of the more grammatically appropriate $\epsilon\zeta\acute{\epsilon}\rho\chi\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ (went) or even the idiomatic $\acute{\alpha}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\beta\eta$ (gone) is indicative of the evangelist’s positive evaluation of Nicodemus. This is significant, for in the gospel, the $\epsilon\lambda\theta\acute{\omicron}\nu$ (having come) word group when used of characters ‘coming’ to Jesus, has positive connotations as it describes an attempt towards commitment to Jesus (e.g. 1:30; 4:29; 5:40; 6:44; 7:37; 10:41). Thus, in reminding the reader that Nicodemus had previously come to Jesus, John was differentiating Nicodemus from his colleagues, rather than seeking to associate him with them. As Nicodemus himself would point out to his colleagues, it was imperative to encounter and discover what Jesus does before judging him. John’s evocative introduction of Nicodemus in 7:50 therefore identifies him as a crypto-disciple placed in the intimidating context of a hostile Sanhedrin meeting.³¹

³¹ Given the pervasive irony in the whole passage, it is remotely possible but unlikely that the phrase $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma \acute{\omicron}\nu \acute{\epsilon}\zeta \acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\acute{\omega}\nu$ (one from among them) in 7:50 is meant to identify Nicodemus as one of the ‘accursed’ people in 7:49 who had come to believe in Jesus (so, Howard-Brook 2003:189). By contrast, it is much more likely that the two $\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\acute{\omega}\nu$ in 7:50 refer to the same Pharisees rather than the crowd. All the same, even if it is granted that the second $\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\acute{\omega}\nu$ refers to the crowd, this would be another strong indication that John approved of Nicodemus as a crypto-disciple. Whichever referent is the second $\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\acute{\omega}\nu$ in John 7:50, whether the crowd or the Pharisees, the designation $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma \acute{\omicron}\nu \acute{\epsilon}\zeta \acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\acute{\omega}\nu$ certainly differentiates Nicodemus from the Pharisees, and does not condemn him as unbelieving.

5.4. Nicodemus' challenge to the Sanhedrin 7:51

In the hostile context of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus the crypto-disciple speaks up to query the threats of the Pharisees: 'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it' (7:51)? Some interpreters aver that this query does not amount in any way to a confession of faith, or even a credible defence of Jesus (Barrett 1978:332; Bultmann 1971:311; de Jonge, 1971:345; Howard-Brook 2003:433; Keener 2003:733; Rensberger 1988:39; Stibbe 1991:54). To cite Lincoln (2005:259) as representative, Nicodemus merely displays sympathy for Jesus, a sympathy 'which shows itself here in his fairness and concern for due process ... [H]is question calls into question the Pharisees' knowledge of the law by reminding them of such passages as Deuteronomy 1:16–17, with its injunctions to give a fair hearing, to judge rightly, not to be partial, and to hear out the small and great alike'.

There are reasons however to reject these negative assessments of Nicodemus' statement in 7:51, especially when the intimidating context is taken seriously, and the criteria for christomorphic assessment are appropriately applied. In the first place, the context of Nicodemus' statement in the Sanhedrin fulfils the first criteria for christomorphicity as it was made in a hostile atmosphere. The statement of sympathy would implicate the crypto-disciple with the same charge of blasphemous heresy worthy of the death penalty as Jesus, and thus demanded the kind of discretion and reserve which Nicodemus displays. Whether Nicodemus himself felt his life in danger at this point is difficult to say, but in any case it is a moot point. Any response to the threat demanded some discretion on the part of the crypto-disciple without compromising Jesus' mission.

Secondly, and as a matter of fact, Nicodemus' statement went beyond the standard demands of the deuteronomic law which required a fair hearing of a case before the court. The law required that the courts should give the accused a fair hearing before they passed judgement (Deut 1:16). Nicodemus was thus right in raising the objection. However, what Nicodemus said was: Μὴ ὁ νόμος ἡμῶν κρίνει τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐὰν μὴ ἀκούσῃ πρῶτον παρ' αὐτοῦ καὶ γινῶ τί ποιεῖ (literally, our law does not judge a man except after hearing from him first *and might know what he does*; John 7:51). This statement adds a second precondition to be met before judgement. While the deuteronomic law and contemporary commentaries on it demanded a hearing of the accused before passing judgement, they never demanded *knowing* the works of the person as a second precondition (cf. *Exodus Rabbah* 21:3 commenting on Exod 14:15). In adding this second precondition, therefore, Nicodemus was challenging his colleagues to take Jesus far more seriously than they would have taken any other accused person.

Indeed, and as pointed out already, Nicodemus' demand echoes the police report, and thus he was patently inviting his colleagues to test the experiences of the police who had testified: 'Never has anyone spoken like this' (7:46). Such a challenge more likely came from one whose concerns went beyond seeking fair adherence to due process. He was asking them to in effect 'taste (or hear) and see' what Jesus was like. Nicodemus was thus not making a mere 'legal quibble' (Rensberger, 1988:39). He was bearing witness, albeit in a discreet manner, thus fulfilling our second criterion above (Renz 2006:267).

Thirdly, Nicodemus' use of ambiguity in his statement is compatible with our third criterion for Christomorphicity. To start with, though the word, ἀκούσῃ (might hear; 7:51b) was typically used to describe a technical judicial hearing (BADG 38), in the gospel of John, it is more

often used to refer to giving Jesus a hearing with the ultimate aim of coming to faith in him (4:42; 5:24–25, 37–38; 6:45, 60, 64; 8:43, 47; 9:27; 10:3, 8, 20; 26–27; 12:46–48; 14:24; 16:27; 18:21, 37; cf. Bultmann 1971:259; Lincoln 2000). So, on the lips of Nicodemus ἀκούση serves as an ambiguous *double entendre*. On the one hand it stated the legal position, yet, on the other hand it bore witness inviting the Sanhedrin to give Jesus the sort of hearing that might lead to faith. It is admitted that this ambiguity makes it uncertain to determine if his statement was a full witness on behalf of Jesus, that is, whether the Pharisees would have taken it as such. Even so, and as the second criterion indicates, the hostile context means that the evangelist likely approved of such ambiguity. And in any case, the rebuke of the Pharisees indicates that they certainly detected that Nicodemus was bearing witness about Jesus as ‘prophet’.

Fourthly, and in its details, the two key words in Nicodemus’ second precondition, καὶ γνῶ τί ποιεῖ (and might know what he does), echo important Johannine theological concepts that are related to Jesus’ mission, thus fulfilling the first three criteria. So, for example, while Nicodemus’ use of the word, γνῶ (might know) could be taken to refer to judicial discovery of the bare facts of the case, elsewhere in John, the γινώσκω word group when used with Jesus as the subject expresses coming to a spiritual knowledge of Jesus akin to conversion (e.g. 6:69, 10:38; 17:8). Certainly with the apparent conversion of the police officers in mind, the Pharisees would have grasped Nicodemus’ invitation to them to follow suit.

Nicodemus’ use of γνῶ (might know) in relation to another Johannine technical-theological terminology, τί ποιεῖ (he does) places this interpretation on even surer footing. For in John’s gospel, what Jesus does is a special Christological term describing Jesus’ σημεῖα (signs)

and ἔργα (works; e.g. 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:34, 54; 5:36; 6:2, 14, 30; 7:3, 4, 21, 31; 10:37–38; 11:47; 12:18, 37; 15:24; 17:4; 20:30). In that case, in his second precondition, Nicodemus was challenging the Sanhedrin to not just give Jesus a fair hearing, but to seriously consider the works of Jesus in a manner that could perhaps lead to faith in Jesus. He was asking the Pharisees in effect to do what Jesus later also invited his disciples to do: ‘Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; *but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves*’ (14:11). Nicodemus was thus not just bearing witness in his discreet manner; he was in fact being christomorphic in his witness.

It is apparent, therefore, that in John 7:51 Nicodemus effectively shares his own prior experience, even if using judicial terminology to the Sanhedrin. He earlier came to Jesus confessing, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for *no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God*’ (3:2). Now he challenges his colleagues to take the same plunge as he did that night, so they too could know what Jesus does. He certainly meets three of the four criteria, the criterion on Jesus’ hour excepted at this stage.³²

5.5. The Sanhedrin’s rebuke of Nicodemus 7:52

The response of the Sanhedrin to Nicodemus’ challenge was a sharp rebuke: ‘Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee’ (7:52). This is rightly taken by most interpreters as reflecting negatively on the Sanhedrin, Bultmann’s assessment being typical: it ‘shows that they are interested only in their own security, to which the scripture is no more than the

³² A legitimate but ultimately unanswerable objection may be mounted as to whether the words were Nicodemus’ or were placed on his lips by John. But on both counts, they reflect a theological tendency which would certainly have enjoyed John’s explicit approval.

means' (1971:312; cf. Barrett 1978:332; Keener 2003:734; Lincoln 2005:260).

However, there are reasons to believe that this rebuke also reflects positively on Nicodemus, and indeed holds him out as fulfilling the functions which Johannine witnesses are charged to fulfil, under the circumstances. Firstly, the overall effect of Nicodemus' statement on his colleagues indicates that it was taken by his colleagues as more than a 'legal quibble' or even a plea for due process. The sarcastic put-down by his colleagues, 'Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?' indicates that Nicodemus' intervention at best irritated his colleagues, and perhaps more. Yes, his witness is discreet, ambiguous and certainly not as openly emphatic as John's statement in 20:21— 'that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God'. Even so, in the hostile judicial context, it was enough to underscore the uniqueness of Jesus and to invite them to explore him in that sense. Given also that in John's gospel, this type of angry reaction is often the typical response of Jesus' opponents to positive testimony,³³ it is evident that the Pharisees understood Nicodemus to be making more than a neutral defence of Jesus.

Secondly, in its details, the rebuke by the Sanhedrin to Nicodemus suggests that they detected his sympathies towards Jesus. So for example, the insulting put-down, Μὴ καὶ σὺ ἐκ τῆς Γαλιλαίας (not you also among the Galileans), is meant to associate Nicodemus with the accursed crowd of 7:49 thus indicating that the Pharisees at least judged Nicodemus' statement as witness at par with that of the police and the crowd. Thirdly, the Pharisees' appeal to scripture was incorrect and betrays not just their deficiency of knowledge, but also that their elitist

³³ In the case of Jesus, they grumbled about him (6:41, 61), they disputed among themselves (6:52), deserted him (6:66), division among them (7:43; 10:19–21), and attempted stoning him (8:59; 10:31).

disdain for the crowd in 7:49 was ill-founded. No passage in the Scriptures states that ‘no prophet is to arise from Galilee’, and given that Jonah (2 Kgs 14:25) and Nahum (Nah 1:1) came from Galilee, their claim places them in a negative light (cf. Barrett 1978:333; Carson 1991:332; Lincoln 2005:260). This again suggests that the force of Nicodemus’ witness put the Pharisees on the defensive. Finally, in implying that Jesus claimed to be a prophet from Galilee, the Pharisees indicate that they indeed understood Nicodemus to be making a claim on behalf of Jesus that he was God’s agent.

All these amount to one conclusion: within the intimidating context of the Sanhedrin, and with the potential danger of being condemned to death alongside Jesus as a heretic deceiver of the people, Nicodemus the crypto-disciple within the Sanhedrin bore witness, but in the discreet manner that would accord with Jesus’ mission at this stage of the narrative. Nicodemus’ secret witness therefore fulfils all four criteria of Christomorphicity above. This last point is now confirmed by comparing how Nicodemus functions in the Sanhedrin with Jesus’ crypto-behaviour in John 7:1–10.

5.6. Comparison of Jesus in John 7:1–10 with Nicodemus in 7:45–52

A brief comparison between Jesus’ crypto-behaviour in 7:1–10, with Nicodemus’ in the Sanhedrin is likely to yield some fruitful insight, given especially that the two accounts occur in the same sub-section of the Gospel sharing the similar themes. This no doubt confirms the Christomorphicity of Nicodemus’ crypto-witness. In the first place, in both passages, the protagonists are presented as part of a group, only to be sharply distinguished from the group as different (7:4–8; 7:50). Secondly, in both, the opponents employ sarcasm to seek to humiliate and intimidate the protagonist (7:4; 7:52). Thirdly, both protagonists employ discretion and ambiguity in a manner that was in conformity

with Jesus' mission (7:8; 7:51). And finally, in both, the encounter does not end in a satisfactory resolution, but with the apparent division or parting of the ways between the protagonist and the group (7:10; 7:52). These similarities indicate the christomorphicity of Nicodemus' witness.

Indeed, a similar but less obvious number of parallels are also found between the crypto-behaviour of Nicodemus in 7:45–52 and the arraignment of the blind man before the Pharisees (9:13–34). In both cases, the protagonists show more positive openness to granting Jesus a fair hearing (7:51; 9:25). In both, the witness centres on the prophetic pedigree of Jesus (7:52; 9:17). And in both, the Pharisees intimidatingly show contempt and cast aspersions on the protagonist (7:52; 9:28, 34). Even though the healed blind man exhibits less reserve and discretion than Nicodemus, such striking correspondences nevertheless undermine the not uncommon view that Nicodemus does not fulfil the high standards of witness set by the healed blind man. Certainly, these correspondences suggest that the first readers of John's gospel would have regarded Nicodemus as a crypto-disciple acting as an effective agent of Jesus within the hostile confines of the Sanhedrin.

6. Summary and Reflections on Contemporary Implications of Findings

The foregoing analyses have yielded a number of insights to enable us to address the question posed regarding John the evangelist's attitude to the crypto-disciples in the narrative. Scholarly opinions, though diverse on this question, appear to have been significantly slanted by the evangelist's condemnation of crypto-disciples who failed to bear witness to Jesus due to their love for human glory (12:42–43). The article has argued that given how Jesus is sometimes portrayed acting in

a clandestine manner and the general socio-cultural attitude to secrecy in first-century AD Palestine, it is more likely that John assessed secret behaviour of the characters in a nuanced manner. It therefore hypothesized that while John censured crypto-disciples who did not bear witness to Jesus in order to retain their privileged status, he was less disapproving of particular instances in which the secret witness of a crypto-disciple was christomorphic.

The exegesis of John 7:1–13 furnished four criteria for determining Christomorphicity of a Johannine crypto-disciple, namely, (a) that covert conduct must be evaluated in the light of the immediate danger faced by the character, and its conformity with Jesus' mission, (b) that such conformity may mandate a character's temporary covert action or ambiguous speech, (c) that covert conduct that accords with Jesus' appointed *καρπὸς* or *ἔργα* would not have been censured by the evangelist, and (d) that fear in the context of threat to life was not viewed negatively by John, except when such fear resulted in conduct not in conformity with Jesus' mission.

These criteria were then employed to examine the portrayal of Nicodemus in 7:45–52, and it was concluded that in accordance with the criteria for determining christomorphicity, he indeed bore discreet witness for Jesus within the hostile context. This demonstrates that the fourth evangelist would have regarded the particular instances of secret witness of crypto-disciples in John 7 with approval. The scholarly consensus that the evangelist roundly censured crypto-discipleship therefore needs to be qualified to reflect this evidently more nuanced and christomorphic attitude.

The above findings no doubt have significant implications for contemporary reflections on clandestine Christian witness in response to hostile contexts. As organizations such as Open Doors, Barnabas

Fund, International Christian Concern and Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, to name just a few, have shown, there is currently a global rising tide of hostility and persecution of Christians (Grim 2012; Mahendra 2016:33–45; Marshall, Gilbert, and Shea 2013; Sauer 2013; Shortt 2012). While hostility towards Christians has been a common feature in certain countries for many decades, the recent escalations especially in the Middle East have been particularly vicious. As noted for example by Brown (2016:202), ‘Though multiple religious communities are negatively impacted by the actions of IS [in the Middle East], the Christian community is the most significantly affected religious minority community in numerical size. One recent report claimed that after 2,000 years of continual existence Christianity could be almost completely eradicated from large swaths of the Middle East in the next five years’. Even if this particular report somewhat exaggerates the situation, few will disagree that Christians living as minorities in many parts of the world are being called upon to witness in the face of intensely heightened dangers to their lives.

Moreover, there are good reasons to support the view that even in developed countries where religious liberties are in theory legally protected, professing Christians are, in parallel with this world-wide trend, nevertheless also undergoing what Philpott (2017:17) identifies as ‘polite persecution’, or Ali (2012:28–35) has described as ‘the rise of Christophobia’ or even ‘Christianophobia’ (Shortt, 2012). The evidence for whether such a trend in the West is indeed real or merely perceived, and even if real, whether it is as systematic, is disputed (Ellis 2016:36; Yancey and Williamson, 2014). Some writers, (e.g. Boston 2017:34–35), label the talk of persecution of Christians in the West for example, as ‘myth’, while others catalogue several instances in which hostile treatment of Christians occurs in these developed settings (Open Doors 2017).

Despite this dispute, there is certainly the need to place the difficult challenges and in some cases, the inimical context that professing Christians who are increasingly in the minority in developed Western countries face in bearing witness to Jesus, in the correct and sober perspective. The hostilities and intimidation they face is not to the same degree as some Christians experience in other regions of the world. Even so there is no doubt that the contemporary environment for bearing witness in most Western countries is increasingly becoming unfriendly, anti-Christian and plainly hostile (Malesic 2009). Ellis' (2016:36) insightful summary of the nature of the hostile context in the US towards Christians is a very perceptive example of this phenomenon:

Today, cultural disdain toward Christianity is increasingly palpable. Whether we are talking about a group of nuns providing services for the marginalized, an educational institution that wishes to maintain faith-based standards for faculty and students, or a medical provider exercising conscience in right-to-life decisions, I believe we will continue to see more constrictions for people of faith.

In that case, this article has some relevance in informing Christian witness under such hostile conditions. It has demonstrated that the ideal in these circumstances would be courageous open witness and certainly a dogged determination to seek 'the glory that comes from God', and not of human beings. It also shows, however, that some particular instances may demand covert witness for Jesus so long as such witness is temporary, is christomorphic and does not compromise the mission of Jesus to save the world. Such discreet acts of bearing witness Nicodemously may be as courageous and powerfully effective as open unfettered witness.

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