

Jesus' Voice in John

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How did Jesus sound? What was the character and tone of his voice? High tenor or deep bass? Was there warmth and sympathy in his voice or did he always speak in an authoritative and emotionally detached manner? What was his attitude toward his listeners: the disciples, the Pharisees, the crowds? Was he sympathetic or cynical, confrontational or engaging? Did he ever laugh or have a sense of humor or was he always serious?

This question about Jesus and his voice can also be asked about the performances of the stories and speeches of Jesus in the Gospel tradition. Given that the stories of the Gospels were normally told or read to groups and virtually never read in silence and rarely alone, how did the storytellers of the early Jesus community present his voice? Specifically, how did Jesus sound in the ancient performances of the Gospel of John? That is, how was the voice of Jesus presented in the early recitals of John's Gospel? Of course, we have no direct evidence for how Jesus' voice sounded, either his actual voice or the voice he was given by ancient storytellers. There were no tape or digital recorders 2000 years ago so we have no way of answering the question on the basis of actual sounds.

Yet we answer these questions every time we read the Gospels aloud in worship. We perform the Gospels every week in churches and classes around the world and in most of those Gospel readings there are some words of Jesus. When we pronounce Jesus' words and perform the stories about Jesus, several things happen. First, we present Jesus' voice, its tone, volume, and attitude. While we may not perform Jesus' words with a goal of historical representation, functionally our performance determines the character of Jesus' voice for the audience. We implicitly claim that this is how Jesus sounded. Second, we present a characterization of Jesus. In our performance of Jesus' words in the context of the full story of John's Gospel, we present Jesus as a character in the story. The way in which we present his voice determines the way in which the people who witness that performance experience Jesus' attitudes, his style, and his way of relating to people. That is, we represent his persona, his character. Therefore, our performance also determines people's experience of Jesus as a person. Third, we also present the other characters with whom Jesus is interacting and in so doing we present the dynamics of his relationships with other people. That is, every time we perform the Gospels, we make decisions about these questions and our answers are experienced in our performance.

This question is important because we have answered that question with a high level of consistency in contemporary performances of the Gospel of John. A very distinctive performance tradition has developed for the presentation of Jesus' voice in the readings

of John's Gospel. Jesus' words in these speeches have traditionally been performed in solemn and serious tones. Jesus has a deep voice in which he delivers a series of authoritative, theological pronouncements. The voice has a strong tone with considerable volume. The tone frequently drops at the end of the sentences creating a note of authority. It is an emotionally detached and highly objective voice. In fact, in the English-speaking world, Jesus often sounds like a British theologian or rector. The tone is often almost a monotone with little or no variation in pitch. If you get on my website at www.tomboomershine.org you can hear this voice of Jesus.

This tradition of Jesus' voice in the Gospel of John is integrally related to the distinctive role of the Gospel of John in the Christian tradition. Along with the letters of Paul, especially Romans, the Gospel of John has been the major source of Christian theology. The major doctrines of the Church—the Nicene doctrine of the trinity, the Chalcedonian doctrine of the unity of the human and divine in Jesus—have been based on the Gospel of John. In part for this reason, the Gospel has always been heard as addressed to Christian believers and this remains the dominant conclusion of modern scholarship. Jesus is presented then as speaking theological truth to believers. Furthermore, with the exception of the reading of the Johannine passion narrative on Good Friday, John's Gospel has been performed as a series of short readings that precede homilies or sermons addressed to "the faithful." The Gospel has virtually never been performed in Christian churches as a whole. Only in the last ten to twenty years has the Gospel been performed in its entirety. But even in those dramatic performances and films, the dominant tone of the authoritative Jesus has continued.

This voice of the Johannine Jesus in the memories of our collective ears has one very substantial downside. When performed in this way, the character of Jesus frequently comes off as what can best be described in the vernacular as a pompous ass. I would suggest that you read the following sections of John aloud in the traditional voice:

Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. (5.22-23)

No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. (6.44-46)

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him. (14.6-7)

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. (14.9b-11a)

The combination of the provocative content of these sayings and the authoritative, detached voice creates a highly alienating overall effect.

Furthermore, Jesus says a lot of very negative things about “the Jews” such as “You are from your father the devil and you choose to do your father’s desires (John 8.44).” When performed as solemn pronouncements, these statements have been experienced as the announcement of theological truths. But when spoken and heard in this way, many of the sayings are experienced as profoundly anti-Jewish. This conclusion is also related to our picture of John’s audience. The dominant conclusion in Johannine scholarship is that John’s audience was a congregation of Christian believers. When read as addressed to Christians, the words of the Gospel about Jews are heard as being about “them,” the Jews, not about “us,” Christians.

The question is whether this voice is appropriate. Specifically, is this how Jesus’ voice sounded in the original performances of John’s Gospel? At first blush, this question appears unanswerable. After all, we have no analogue or digital sound recordings of Jesus’ voice. But we do have **ancient** recordings of Jesus’ voice. A foundational shift has taken place in recent research on the ancient world. It has now been established that ancient manuscripts were published by public performances and were written for those performances.¹ When the evangelists wrote the Gospels, they were making a recording of the sounds of the stories with the assumption that every reader of their Gospel would reproduce the sounds, usually having learned the words by heart. When they wrote, the evangelists were like composers writing a musical manuscript. They were not writing for readers as we now read: silently with a book in our hands. They were composing sounds that would be reproduced by storytellers and readers, even if, like the Ethiopian eunuch, they were reading alone. (Acts 8.28-30) Let me emphasize this because it is of foundational importance: the writers of the gospels were not composing texts that would be read in silence by individual readers. Relatively few people could read in antiquity current estimates are that not more than 10% in the Greco-Roman world of the 1st century could read.² Thus, ancient writers wrote with the assumption that their writings would be published by public performances for audiences. In most instances, the texts were

¹ Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2003); Paul Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity,” in *JBL* 109 (1990):3-27.

² While some instances of private, even silent reading, have been identified, these are relatively minor exceptions to the general pattern. See Paul Saenger, “Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society” in *Viator* 13 (1982): 367-414.

performed ‘by heart.’³ Thus, the Gospel of John, like virtually all of ancient literature, was written for performance.⁴ We can appropriately think of the text of John as an ancient recording of performances of John’s story.

For 21st century folk, it is important to distinguish our current concept of memorization from the ancient practice of learning “by heart.” Dennis Dewey makes the distinction between “memorization” as head memory and “internalization” as heart memory.⁵ Head memory is associated with rote memorization and the “mindless” recitation of words or repetition of notes. Heart memory is embodied memory that involves the whole of the body. It includes emotion as well as thought. Thus, Dewey notes that we have a selective memory of the injunctions following the Shema:

Most pastors can remember the last four of the five “corollaries” to the Shema (Deuteronomy 6.4ff): catechize (teach these things to your children), theologize (talk about them continually), symbolize (wear them on your wrists and foreheads), publicize (inscribe them on your doorposts and gates). But few can remember the important corollary that follows immediately upon the commandment to love God with heart, soul and strength: “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart” (Deut. 6:6) (internalize)⁶

³ The memorization of texts was a fundamental didactic practice of ancient schools, both Jewish and pagan. The training of rhetoricians for their practice in courts and in politics was based on the extensive memorization of long speeches by the rhetoricians of the past. This basic training for rhetoricians went on for years. It was normal practice for a great rhetorician to have memorized many speeches. As with musical composers, so also with rhetoricians, the memorization of these sounds provided the foundation for their own compositions. See H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956).

⁴ The question of whether it was performed from memory is initially more difficult. Those like myself who have tried to memorize and perform the Gospels have found the Gospel of John to be far more difficult to learn than the Synoptics. The problem is the speeches. They are very difficult to learn. However, in view of the widespread memorization of long and complex rhetorical speeches in the ancient world, the probability is that the writer of the Gospel of John was writing in the rhetorical tradition and assumed that the whole Gospel would be memorized and recited. But whether the Gospel of John was performed from memory or with a text present, it was performed for audiences.

⁵ Dennis Dewey, “Great in the Empire of Heaven,” in *Preaching the Sermon on the Mount* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 69-74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

If we are going to imagine performances of John's story as the normative medium of experience of John in the ancient world, we need to imagine persons who were telling the story and presenting the speeches of Jesus "by heart."

Could someone have told John all at one time? Of course. Ancient storytelling performances were often long, four to six hours or more. Storytellers were the primary providers of an evening's entertainment. Performances of Homer's epic often went on all night. The performance of written narratives such as *The Iliad* and the Gospels was a continuation of the traditions of ancient storytelling. Storytelling was the most widely practiced art in the ancient world. Stretching back into the millennia of pre-literate human culture, storytelling was the foundation of tribal life.⁷ Thus, the sources of the performance traditions of internalized **written** narratives were developments of the performance traditions of traditional **oral** narratives. Thus, it is highly likely that the Gospel of John was learned "by heart" and told in a three to four hour evening of storytelling. And more than any of the other Gospels, John's story was an interweaving of stories of events with a series of long speeches by Jesus.

But how can we determine the character of Jesus' voice? A constant feature of storytelling performance is the storyteller's address to the audience. The storyteller is always talking to the audience. Storytellers are first of all themselves. A storyteller addresses his or her audience as himself or herself. Think in detail about what is happening at the beginning of the recital of John's story: "In the beginning was the Word." Who am I in this moment of story introduction? I am Tom retelling the words of John by heart. And who are you? You are the audience the object and receiver of this story. Storytelling is an extensive and dynamic interaction of a storyteller and an audience. The dynamics of that interaction profoundly shape the meaning of the story for the audience. One set of clues, therefore, to the character of Jesus' voice is to observe the dynamics of interaction between the storyteller and the audience.

In the Gospel of John, the interaction of the storyteller with the audience is often as the character of Jesus. One of the stock in trade traditions of storytellers is the presentation of multiple characters. During the telling of the story, the storyteller presents various characters. In John's story, the storyteller presents Jesus, Nicodemus, the blind man, the Samaritan woman, etc. In presenting these characters, the storyteller gives each of them a distinctive presence with gestures, accents, tones, and ways of relating to other characters in the story. Thus, the blind man is different than the Pharisees and his parents in the story. An integral part of the fascination and joy of storytelling is this playful representation of the different characters of the story.

⁷ The handing down of sacred stories was the most central cultural and religious practice of ancient tribes. The stories were passed down from generation to generation by learning them "by heart" and repeatedly telling the stories to children (Deut. 6.4-7).

The storyteller in a sense becomes different characters and presents each character's gestures, facial expressions, attitudes, and voice. This presentation of various characters is a major factor of audience address. When there are various characters interacting in the story, the audience is often addressed as one or more of those characters. Sometimes the storyteller may present the interactions of the different characters as addressed to an imaginary character on the imaginary stage of the story. But most of the time the words of the various characters are addressed directly to the audience. This is a foundational difference between storytelling and drama. In a drama, the actors relate to each other on a stage. The members of the audience are spectators who watch the actors interacting with each other. But in storytelling the audience is frequently addressed as one of the characters in the story. Notice, for example, what happens in the story of Jesus and Nicodemus. The audience is addressed as Nicodemus, especially in the later parts of the story (3.10-21). In this speech I, as the storyteller, present Jesus and you, as the listeners, become Nicodemus who is addressed by Jesus. This dynamic of changes in the characters of the storyteller and the audience happens throughout the Gospel. Just as the storyteller imaginatively becomes the various characters, so also the members of the audience are invited to become the characters who are addressed. Furthermore, just as the storyteller frequently changes character, so also the audience frequently changes its imaginary identity. Thus, right after the storyteller's speech as Jesus to the audience as Nicodemus, the storyteller presents John the Baptist and the audience is addressed as John's disciples.(3.26-36)

This storytelling dynamic is especially present in long speeches. The storyteller presents one of the characters in the story giving a speech to some person or group. The storyteller's audience is addressed as that character. Long speeches make it possible for the audience to live into the character who is being addressed in part because the speech goes on for a long time. Just as the storytelling fiction leads to an experience of the storyteller as the character who is speaking, so also the members of the audience have an extended period of time in which to experience themselves as the character being addressed in the speech. Notice what happens in Jesus' speech about the vine:

“I am the vine and you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in them bears much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”(15.5-8)

Who am I? And who are you? I am Jesus and you are the disciples.

An important dimension of audience identification is that we as part of an audience can identify with an audience that is different than our actual identity. It is possible, for example, for a white person to experience a story told to a black audience as an integral part of that community. This can include giving verbal responses, laughter, and standing

up. This is equally possible for a black person in a white audience. This dynamic happens in the screening of films every day. One of the unique dynamics of watching “foreign” films is that the films were created for audiences that are significantly different than the audience to whom the film is marketed and screened. People from all over the world watch films that were produced for American audiences. I have experienced this dynamic watching French, Indian, and German films including Nazi films produced for German audiences in the Nazi era. I have experienced these dynamics as a member of an audience in synagogues, Russian and Greek Orthodox churches, and Roman Catholic communities. I may not be Jewish, Orthodox, or Roman Catholic but I can fully participate in worship services as Jewish, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic. This is also true of audiences in another period of history. As a 21st century high literate white male Christian, I can identify with the audiences of ancient Israelite stories and vicariously experience some dimensions of the experience of ancient tribal audiences listening to stories told by ancient Israelite storytellers.

Thus, listening to storytelling, both ancient and contemporary, is an opportunity for vicarious participation in a community of which I am not actually a member. However, as a member of that audience, one is quite aware of the fact that this is an imaginative experience. At the same time, there is reality to this participation and identity. While there is a clear realization that the story assumes experiences and knowledge that one does not fully share, one can experience and vicariously identify with feelings, experiences, and attitudes of that community’s particular experience. There can be a feeling of oneness and identification that is transformative. You can learn a lot about another community by listening to that community’s stories.

Let us then identify the interactions of the Johannine storyteller and his audiences. Yes, **audiences** because the story was composed not for **an** audience but for multiple audiences. Furthermore, in any given audience of a performance of John’s Gospel there may have been many different people: different genders and ages, slave and free, poor and rich, Jews and Gentiles, believers and non-believers. Thus, virtually all commentaries on John are based on the assumption that the Gospel was addressed to readers who would read the manuscript in silence. This is a historical anachronism in which the practices of a later literate culture are read back into the ancient world. John was composed for audiences, not readers.

Audience Address in the Gospel of John

Among the four Gospels, John is distinctive in its manner of audience address. One of those distinctive features of John’s Gospel is that there are a lot of long speeches by Jesus, more than in any other Gospel. For example, in Mark there are two long speeches while Matthew and Luke both have five. In John there are eight long speeches and several shorter speeches by Jesus that comprise nearly half of the Gospel.

This is a list of Jesus’ major speeches with the characters who are addressed:

- Nicodemus (3.10-21)
- The Jews who want to kill him (5.19-47)
- The crowd, the Jews, and the disciples after the feeding of the 5000 (6.26-70)
- The crowd, the Pharisees, the Jews who believed in him and the Jews at the feast of Tabernacles, a long speech of at least 10 minutes (7.21-8.58)
- The Pharisees after the healing of the man born blind (9.41-10.12)
- The Jews at the Temple Festival (10.25-38)
- Philip and Andrew, the Jerusalem crowd, and the audience after the triumphal entry (12.23-43)
- The disciples at the last supper, the longest speech of at least 20 minutes (13.12-16.33)

Furthermore, Jesus' speeches in John are addressed to the audience as a much wider range of characters than in any of the other Gospels. Just for comparison, Matthew has five long speeches all of which are addressed to the audience as the crowds and/or the disciples:

- The crowds with the disciples on the mountain (Matt. 5-7)
- The twelve (Matt. 10.5-42)
- The crowds at the sea (Matt. 13.3-52)
- The disciples (Matt. 18.2-35)
- The crowds and the disciples (Matt. 23.1-25.46)

Jesus' five major speeches in Luke are similar in their audience address. But in John the speeches are addressed to a wide range of different characters: Nicodemus, various groups of Jews, the Pharisees, and the disciples. Thus, the storyteller's imaginative interactions with the audience in John are more complex than in any of the Synoptics.

Another distinctive feature of Jesus' speeches in John is that several of the stories—Nicodemus, the feeding of the 5000, the trip to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, the healing of the man born blind, and the triumphal entry—function as introductions to long speeches to the audience as characters in the preceding story. In these speeches, the story moves imperceptibly from a third person description of an event to a first person address by Jesus to the audience. An example is the story of Nicodemus. (3.1-21) The storyteller tells the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night and reports their conversation. After several exchanges, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus in the first person: “Truly I say to you, we speak of what we know and we bear witness to what we have seen but you do not receive our testimony. If I have spoken to you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I speak to you about heavenly things?” But in the next sentences, Nicodemus fades into the background and Jesus is talking in the third person: “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the world, so also must be the Son of Man be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life... For God so loved the world that he gave his only son ...” In the telling of the story, the storyteller as Jesus is now talking directly to the audience as if the audience were

Nicodemus.⁸ The audience has imaginatively become Nicodemus and Jesus' speech is addressed to each member of the audience as a "seeker" Pharisee.

The most distinctive feature of John's Gospel is the clearly marked structure of the addresses to the audience. In chapters 1-4, the audience is addressed as various groups of 1st century Judaism: the Pharisees (1.26-27), the Jews in the Temple at Passover (2.16-19), Nicodemus/the Pharisees (3.1-21), the followers of John the Baptist (3.27-36), and the Samaritans (4.21-24). After the story of the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethzatha (5.1-15), there is a sudden and radical change in the identity of the audience that Jesus addresses. Jesus' speech to the audience as the Jews that follows this healing story is by far the longest speech to this point in the story and it is introduced by this narrative comment: "For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God." (5.18) Throughout the next seven chapters of the story following this radical and sudden shift (John 5-12), the audience is addressed as various groups of Jews who are variously drawn to Jesus and are repelled by him. Jesus' dialogue partners in this long section of the story are torn between believing in Jesus and not believing in him. There is constant change in the specific identity of the character to whom Jesus is speaking in these stories: for example, as Jews who want to kill him, then as the crowd and the disciples (6), then as Jews who believe in him (8), then as Pharisees and as Jews who took up stones to stone him, (10), then as Andrew and Philip (12), and frequently throughout this section as simply Jews. In this section of the Gospel (chaps. 5-12) the audience is addressed as Jews who are constantly changing in their attitude and response to Jesus from total alienation to belief and everything in between. Finally, there is another sudden change in the identity of the audience with the story of Jesus' last supper. The climax of the speeches of Jesus to the audience is Jesus' long talk with the disciples after washing the disciples' feet (13-17). In this long speech, the audience is addressed as Jesus' disciples. Thus, the structure of audience address in the Gospel as a whole is clearly marked and moves from Jesus addressing various groups of Jews (1-4) to Jesus addressing Jews who believe and don't believe in him (5-12) to Jesus addressing his disciples (13-17). The audience is thereby invited to move in its relationship with Jesus from being Jews, to Jews who are violently torn between belief and unbelief, to disciples who are in a highly intimate relationship of mutuality and love with Jesus.

⁸ The punctuation of different translations reflect different decisions about the narrative character of this speech. In the RSV, NIV and NAB there are no quotation marks enclosing John 3.16-21, thereby indicating the editor's conclusion that this was not part of the speech of Jesus but is a comment by the narrator. The TEV and *The Complete Gospels* end the quotation marks and begin the narrative comment at 3.13. The NRSV (also NEB, CEV, JB) has the more accurate punctuation of quotation marks around the entire speech (John 3.10-21) thereby indicating that all of these words were part of Jesus' speech.

Another way of describing the patterns of audience address is the frequency of each of the characters that the audience is invited to become. In the fourteen long (more than one verse) speeches, the audience is addressed as “the crowd” three times: the feeding of the five thousand (6.26-27, 32-33), the Feast of Tabernacles (7.21-24), and the triumphal entry (12.30-36); as “the Jews” three times: the feeding of the five thousand (6.43-59), the Feast of Tabernacles (7.16-19), the Temple Festival (10.25-30); as the Pharisees two or three times: explicitly at the feast of Tabernacles (8.12, 14-18) and the healing of the man born blind (9.41-10.12) and implicitly in the dialogue with Nicodemus (3.1-21); as the Jews who want to kill or stone him three times: the healing of the crippled man on the Sabbath (5.19-40), the Feast of Tabernacles (8.48-58) and the festival of Dedication (10.31-38); once as the Jews who believe in him at the Feast of Tabernacles (8.23-47), and four times as the disciples: the Samaritan woman (4.34-38), the feeding of the five thousand (6.61-65), Philip and Andrew (12.23-28), and the last supper/footwashing (13-17). Thus, there are thirteen extended speeches of Jesus to the audience as characters in the story, nine to a range of Jewish groups and four to the disciples. But three of those four addresses to the disciples are part of the last supper dialogue and are effectively one long speech.⁹ Only one speech, a brief address during the dialogue after the feeding of the five thousand (6.61-65), is directed to the audience as the disciples prior to this climactic conversation. In the whole Gospel leading up to the passion narrative, therefore, twelve of the fourteen extended speeches of Jesus are addressed to the audience as various groups of Jews who are torn between believing and not believing.

The most striking dimension of the audience address is that all of these characters are identified explicitly as Jews. The only characters who are not explicitly named as Jews are “the crowd” and “the disciples.” But “the crowd” is clearly identified as Jews who were fed (6.24, 41) or were in Jerusalem (e.g., 1.11, 35) and “the disciples” are likewise identified as Jews (1.47). That is, there are no non-Jews who are directly addressed in the interactions of the storyteller and the audience. The audience is never addressed as a character other than various groups of Jews. Throughout the story, the storyteller as Jesus addresses the audience as Jews. The structure of Jesus’ speeches moves from speeches to various groups of Jews who are interested in him, to Jews who are conflicted about believing in him or being hostile toward him, to his long talk with the audience as his Jewish disciples. Thus, in order to participate fully in the hearing of the story, the audience of the Gospel, regardless of their actual ethnic or religious identity, must imaginatively become Jews. Furthermore, throughout the first half of the Gospel, the audience is explicitly addressed as Jews who are torn between believing and not believing in Jesus.

This fact raises the further question of the relationship between the audience as addressed in the story and the actual historical audiences of the Gospel. The cultural horizon of the

⁹ Only one speech, a brief address during the dialogue about the feeding of the five thousand (6.61-65), is directed to the audience as the disciples prior to this climactic conversation.

Gospel is congruent with the cultural horizon of diaspora Judaism in the Hellenistic cities of the Greco-Roman world. This was the same cultural world in which Paul carried out his missionary work and that is reflected in his letters. However, in contrast to the letters of Paul, there is no explicit inclusion of Gentiles in the audience of the Gospel of John. The probability is, therefore, that the actual historical audiences of the Gospel of John correspond to the audiences addressed in the Gospel itself: Jews, Pharisees, the followers of John the Baptist, perhaps Samaritans, and Jews who believed in Jesus. However, the Gospel does not exclude Gentiles from its audience. It only requires that they become Jews in their imaginative participation in the story. That is also true for later participants in John's audience. In order to participate appropriately in the interactions of the Johannine storyteller and the character of Jesus with the audience, later Christian audiences must become Jews in their identity as listeners.

Thus, the structure of audience address in the Gospel of John does not support the conclusion that the Gospel is addressed to Christian believers, Jewish or Gentile. All of the storyteller's speeches addressed to the audience prior to the last supper (John 1-12) do not presume belief. The prologue talks explicitly about those who have believed in his name (1.12) but addresses this to the audience without presuming that they share that belief. The structure of audience address in its movement from Jews (1-4) to Jews who are conflicted about believing in Jesus (5-12) to Jews who are disciples (13-17) is the clearest internal sign of the purpose of the Johannine storyteller. The Gospel is structured to invite the audience as Jews to move from being interested in Jesus, to considering the issues involved in believing in Jesus as Messiah, to full identification as disciples. This does not exclude believers. They can live through this process of coming to belief in Jesus many times. But the story is structured for non-believers and does not exclude them by presuming belief at any point (with the possible exception of chapter 21). The character of audience address, therefore, indicates that the Gospel was conceived as an evangelistic story directed to Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. The purpose of the story is stated explicitly to each member of the audience at the end of Jesus' appearance to Thomas: "These are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (20.31)

What then can we learn from this about the tone of Jesus' voice in the 1st century performances of John's Gospel? The actual character of audience address in the Gospel of John makes it highly improbable that the voice of Jesus in the original recitals of his words in John's Gospel was the impassive, deep and authoritarian voice of the performance tradition. This traditional tone only makes sense if the audience was predominantly Christian believers who are non-Jewish. Whatever the historical identity of the audiences of the Gospel of John may have been in its early performances, a storyteller told the story from memory, either with or without a manuscript, to audiences who were addressed as Jews. The patterns of audience address in the Gospel are clearly designed to engage the audience in an encounter with Jesus as a highly sympathetic character who invites them to believe in him as the Messiah and to identify themselves as

his disciples. He is trying to win them and to invite them into a deeply personal relationship. He is not giving them a long series of pronouncements.

The tone of Jesus' voice throughout the recitals of the Gospel of John was sympathetic and emotionally warm. But perhaps most important, it was the honest voice of a friend.¹⁰ There was probably a wide range of volume in Jesus' voice from soft to loud. A strong and confident voice, yes, but a voice that invited the listeners to reflect on their responses to his words and to him. The tone is inviting, explorative, and probing. It is even possible that some of these statements are said with a smile and even laughter. The tone of these speeches is the tone of a rabbi, who is inviting the listeners to think. It is a tone associated in contemporary experience with Yiddish. The character of Jesus has credibility because the storyteller is presenting a story about the most engaging martyr in the history of Israel. But the tone of Jesus' speeches had to be radically different than the way in which the speeches have traditionally been performed.

In fact, a sympathetic, honest and engaging voice of Jesus is the only way in which the Gospel can be told as a whole and hold the attention of an audience. If Jesus' words are presented in the way in which the Gospel is usually performed, Jesus becomes a very alienating character. He is a kind of pompous figure who is constantly making arrogant statements. It is impossible to maintain the attention and good will of an audience if Jesus' statements are performed in this manner. This effect may be somewhat more pronounced in the modern world but the same dynamic was operative in the ancient world. Even when enacted in a more sympathetic manner, Jesus' statements are often extremely provocative. But they are only credible when they are presented in a self confident but humble manner. Furthermore, the authoritative, theological Jesus is also boring. Unless there is human warmth and engagement in his manner, the character of Jesus in John becomes untenable as a character who can sustain this "one man show."

Thus, the conclusion that flows from the analysis of audience address in John is that the speeches of Jesus throughout the Gospel were performed in a warmly engaging tone addressed to the audience as various groups of Jews. His tone throughout the story is loving, peaceful and deeply centered, strong, confident and self-assured yet humble and inviting. This is most pronounced in the long speech to his disciples but it is true throughout the Gospel. Jesus' words are often provocative and shocking. As a character Jesus is aggressive and persistent, constantly appealing for the audience to listen to him, to receive his words, and to believe in him. In response to ongoing rejection and plots to kill him, Jesus is persistent in his determination to engage in dialogue with the audience as various Jews and to invite them into a deeper relationship with him and with God.

¹⁰ Gail O'Day's description of the tradition of friendship in the ancient world and of the characterization of Jesus as a true friend is completely congruent with the dynamics of audience address in the Gospel. The tone of Jesus' words in the Gospel including those addressed to those who are seeking to kill him is the tone of a friend who steadily tells them the truth. (Reference to her essay)

Jesus' words do not have their origin in a spirit of hostility or judgment. In fact, he explicitly says this at several points in the Gospel, most notably in the last speech of Jesus that is addressed directly to the audience:

Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world but to save the world. (12.44-47)

Jesus is presented as a person who knows that people are seeking to kill him and the listeners to John's Gospel sixty or so years later know that they finally succeeded. But Jesus never responds with hostility or violence to these attacks.

Furthermore, the Gospel invites anyone who wants to enter into the story to identify themselves with the audiences of Jews to whom the story is addressed. This is stated explicitly in the prologue: "He came to his own home and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God..." However, it is striking that there are no Gentiles in the horizon of the Gospel. The audience is never addressed as Gentiles. In the story, when some Greeks ask Andrew and Philip to see Jesus, his response is "Now the hour has come" and he does not meet with them. The only significant Gentiles in the entire story are Pilate and the Roman soldiers who condemn him to death and execute him. Furthermore, the audience is never addressed as Christians. The audience is addressed as disciples in the most intimate speech of the entire Gospel tradition, the last supper speech in chapters 13-17. But the disciples are addressed as Jews who believe in him, not as Christians who are non-Jews.

Therefore, all those who identified themselves as non-Jews, both then and now, are required by the character of John's story to imagine themselves as Jews for the appropriate telling and hearing of this story. That may be difficult and there may be dimensions of the storyteller's story of which the listener may be unaware as a result of not being Jewish. But just as all ethnic stories require sympathetic listening and identification with the story's audience, the Gospel of John implicitly invites all of its listeners to become Jewish as listeners to this story.

Thus, an analysis of audience address in the Gospel reveals the basic character of the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John is addressed to Jews throughout the Gospel. The storyteller/author presents himself as a Jew who believes that Jesus is the Messiah. This also clarifies the basic problem in the interpretation of the Gospel of John now. The Gospel is almost exclusively read by and for Christians who do not think of themselves as being Jews. Most Christians hear the words in the Gospel about "the Jews" as being about "them" rather than "us." Our task as performers of the Gospel is to invite our audiences to identify with the original audience and to hear Jesus' words to the Jews as

addressed to them. That means presenting Jesus' words in a manner that is thoroughly Jewish and rabbinic, and, therefore, engaging, provocative, warm but probing, confident yet humble. It is the voice of a discerning and true friend.

The challenge for those who would tell the Gospel of John, therefore, is to find a tone for the character of Jesus that will make him credible and appealing as a Jewish character and that will sustain a telling of the entire Gospel at one time. Part of the challenge is that the liturgical theological voice is so dominant that we virtually cannot hear Jesus' voice in any other tone. It is also a formidable challenge because it is so difficult for contemporary audiences to connect with the dynamics of the dialogue between Jesus and the various groups of Jews.

I would invite each of you to perform Jesus' words in a way that is warm, non-authoritarian, strong, friendly and inviting. This is another dimension of a historical critical interpretation of the Gospel, of listening to the Gospel in its original historical context. Furthermore, this has major implications for how we present the Gospel of John in worship and how we preach the Gospel.

Thus, some brief observations about preaching the Gospel of John. The readings/tellings need to be contextualized for Christian audiences who identify themselves as "not Jews." This is a complex and difficult issue. But, if our congregations have spiritually identified with the traditions of Israel, they can think of themselves as Jews and hear this Gospel as addressed to them as Jews who believe that Jesus is the Messiah. It is, therefore, important that we tell the stories of the Hebrew scriptures and encourage our congregations to become fully a part of the spiritual heritage of Israel. I would also highly recommend that any texts of John to be recited in worship be memorized and told rather than read from a text. In this way, the address to the audience is made more explicit. But, most important, telling Jesus' actions and words makes Jesus more human, more accessible, more Jewish, and more attractive. Performing the Gospel as a story told "by heart" counteracts the inevitable tendency of readings to become emotionally distant and that is particularly dangerous with the Gospel of John.

In preaching, the stories of John need to be set explicitly in a first century Jewish context in the aftermath of a disastrous war in a period of unprecedented change in the religion because of the destruction of the Temple. There are many connections between their context and ours: a period of radical religious change, violent conflicts between political and religious groups, a culture in turmoil. But, most important, the stories of John need to be interpreted as stories about a person, not as sources or illustrations of theological doctrines.

Finally, the most serious problem that is created by this traditional style of presenting Jesus' voice is that it works against the greatest strength of John's story, namely, the building of intimacy between the audience and Jesus. The authoritative voice makes Jesus into a distant and intimidating person. But the great value of John is that Jesus is

presented as a more accessible and intimate person than in the other Gospels. In John's Gospel, Jesus becomes a true friend. You can get closer to Jesus in John than anywhere else in the Gospels. Perhaps paradoxically, he is also more human, even while making a series of statements about himself and his relationship with God that are unprecedented for any figure in human history. The dynamic structure of John's Gospel creates an experience for the listeners of growing steadily closer to Jesus. In part, this is because there is so much conflict with him. But because of Jesus' spirit, this is an experience of growing intimacy. It is closer an experience of growing closer to God. But that intimacy with God is directly connected to intimacy with Jesus. Entering into that relationship with its growing intimacy is what makes John distinctive. As a listener, there is the potential of growing in love with Jesus, with God and with others. As Jesus says, "Abide in my love" and "Love one another." In the experience of the Gospel, Jesus' voice is the connection with that experience of being loved by Jesus and by God, even when you are so angry at him you want to kill him. Therefore, I would invite you to read the Gospel of John out loud, first to yourself, and then to learn and tell it "by heart" to others and listen for Jesus' voice.