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## **The Gospel of John within the Context of the Urban Society of Ephesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE.**

My project is part of the larger work of writing a full-scale historical-critical commentary on the Gospel of John in the series 'Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar' (EKK) which will also consider selective aspects of its reception history. Within this framework I investigate aspects of the narrative and literary design of the gospel that might be explained generally from an urban context or educational background or, more precisely, from the context of Ephesus.

My project does not intend to prove an origin of the gospel in Ephesus. From the sources of the second century CE, this is the most plausible hypothesis about its place of origin, and this is heuristically presupposed in my investigation. My aim is, rather, to contextualise, illustrate and explain the composition and reading of this gospel and some of its specific features from the societal background of an urban contexts or, more precisely, of ancient Ephesus the author and his first readers shared. The perspective of this project is, thus, not merely text-centred but includes a text-genetic and a reception-oriented dimension.

Such aspects in which the Gospel of John also differs from the earlier gospel tradition and which deserve consideration within an urban or Ephesian context are:

a) *A Culture of Books*: John is a 'bookish' work, beginning with a hint to the beginning of the Scriptures of Israel (1:1) and ending with a glimpse into a the world as a library (21:25). Such a perspective calls for an interpretation within a framework not only of Jewish scribal cultures but also of ancient book cultures, of book production and dissemination, reading knowledge and reading circles that most probably point to an urban context and can be illustrated from the city of Ephesus.

b) *Economy*: The economic situation represented in the narrative (and also mirrored in the Johannine epistles) differs from that of the Palestinian-Jewish situation of the early Jesus movement as represented in Mark and Matthew. Even more than in Luke, the texts mirrors a better economic status of (parts of) the community, regarding housing and hospitality and supply-networks and enters discourses about aspects of wealth and supply for the needy that are to be illustrated not only from the background of Jewish diaspora communities but also within the context of urban living conditions and patronage relations.

c) *Community Forms*: The social shape of the communities of disciples mirrored in John appears rather egalitarian, with the image of not only a 'family' but also a circle of 'friends'. Such an ethos which is also confirmed in the Johannine Epistles can best be paralleled from the structure of Greco-Roman voluntary associations for which there is riche epigraphic evidence in Ephesus and elsewhere. Such a contextualisation of the social form of the Johannine communities can help to better describe their peculiarities over against other early Christian communities, that existed possibly at the same time and in the same area.

d) *Philosophical Resonances*: Resonances not only with early Jewish traditions but also with Greco-Roman philosophical discourses, e.g. by the use terms such as *logos*, *phōs*, *alētheia*, the talk about God as *pneuma* etc., strongly point to a milieu of urban education. The history of reception of John in the second to fourth centuries CE shows that this work could attract the interest of philosophically educated readers more than any other early Christian text. It must be assumed that the author deliberately inserted references to wider Greco-Roman discourses to place his work into such a wider discourse and that he could also expect that some of his readers would be able to be attracted or interact.

e) *Theatre and Fiction*: In several scenes, John shows a clearly dramatic design that points to dramatic skills on the part of the author and possibly also his first recipients. Techniques and forms of such design can be illustrated from urban cultural education. From the theatre context, we also know that there was the training of *prosopopoiia*, that is speaking through the mask of a figure. Such techniques have been adduced for explaining ancient Christian epistolary pseudepigraphy but they can also be adduced for the deliberate design of fictional discourses and dialogues that can claim to express the deepest truth. Similarly, the deliberate composition of fictional narratives (e.g., the footwashing, possibly also the Lazarus scene) and dialogues (e.g. with Nicodemus or Pontius Pilate) or discourses (e.g. the farewell discourse) as a medium of conveying truth requires a context in which fiction was considered capable to convey truth.

f) *The representation of women*: The way women are depicted in John (compared with the other gospels) is quite significant: All women are presented as self-governed figures, and none of them is introduced merely by mention of her relation to a father or husband. The Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, but to some degree also the mother of Jesus function as paradigmatic witnesses and thus also offer the readership, in particular female readers, a role model of discipleship. The closest analogies to this are found in apocryphal gospel traditions of the 2nd century as well as in the various Acts of the Apostles where women from urban milieus, some of whom belong to 'better society', become the paradigm of a life-changing encounter. Here, the socio-historical and epigraphical data on the position of women in the urban society of Ephesus are particularly illuminating. There is not only the fact that Ephesus was since long determined by the cult of Artemis, in which female priests and office-holders were present, there is also the civic institution of the *prytany*, where we know of a larger number of female *prytaneis*. Here, an influence of the particularly Ephesian urban milieu seems especially plausible.

In all the fields mentioned the more detailed study of the history, the archaeological and inscriptional evidence of Ephesus, together with other sources and studies on aspects of education, theatre, and rhetoric may contribute to a fuller explanation of specific features of the Gospel of John, its differences from the earlier tradition, and its later reception.