

The Pharisees: A House Divided¹

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The Problem: Vague Characterization of the Pharisees

Characters are the life of a story. Their words and deeds give narratives much of their meaning. As opponents of the protagonist Jesus in the Gospel of John, the Pharisees propel the plot and add depth. But analyzing the Pharisees is difficult: an accurate narratological classification of the Pharisees as a specific group character is not always possible.

On the one hand, the Pharisees, chief priests, Levites and scribes belong to the Ἰουδαῖοι, the most important opponents of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel.² However, the Pharisees also appear as a distinct group when confronting Jesus.

The dialogue between John the Baptist and the delegation from Jerusalem in John 1:19–29 reveals the problem:

And this is the testimony of John, when *the Jews* (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) sent *priests and Levites* (ιερεῖς καὶ Λευίτας) from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” (John 1:19)

Two identifiable Jewish group characters, the “*priests and Levites*,” are sent by “the Jews” from Jerusalem, who are introduced here for the first time in the Gospel. Priests, Levites and “the Jews” are given different names, but are closely connected delegations.

Further interrogation of John the Baptist illustrates the narrative vagueness: during the dialogue the narrator parenthetically supplies the information that the delegation was not in fact sent by “the (nonspecific) Jews” (1:19) but by “the Pharisees” in particular:

Now they had been sent from the *Pharisees* (ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων) (John 1:24).

¹ Cf. also my contribution, Uta Poplutz, “Die Pharisäer als literarische Figurengruppe im Johannesevangelium,” in *Narrativität und Theologie im Johannesevangelium* (ed. Jörg Frey and Uta Poplutz; BThSt 130; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2012), 19–39. I am grateful to Laura Johnson from Gordon College for polishing the English in my essay.

² The term “the Jews” occurs sixty-six times in John’s Gospel, making them one of the most important characters. For the different meanings connected with Ἰουδαῖοι, cf. Urban C. von Wahlde, “The Terms for Religious Authorities in the Fourth Gospel: A Key to Literary Strata?,” *JBL* 98 (1979): 231–53; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (repr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 125–30.

One may solve the problem by hypothesizing a second delegation, but this only obscures the deeper issue. The imprecise narration becomes part of the Pharisees' identity: it seems that the narrator is not interested in an accurate differentiation. This significantly hinders a thorough characterization of the Pharisees.

A final observation concerning the problem is that different groups of the Jewish authorities can enter the stage separately, with the exception of the Levites in John 1:19, yet they can also appear in alternating coalitions. The narrator combines the chief priests, scribes and Pharisees into various pairs without any differentiation in their speech or actions.

Thus the starting position is complex and poses a special challenge for the application of narrative approaches. However, I think this vagueness of characterization is significant. It may be possible to show that this unspecific classification of the Pharisees within the other Jewish groups actually determines them in a particular way and contributes to their characterization.

Theory: Narrative Analysis of Group Characters

A fundamental feature of characters is their description by means of limited information.³ The narrator is selective in what he writes, for only some events and speeches can be narrated, and only these can be analyzed.⁴ In contrast to real people, the information about a literary character is not expandable. As a result, any information may serve as an important character indicator.

A character can be defined as the sum of all pieces of information, with characterization being the method of linking this information together. This not only entails naming a character's qualities (*direct characterization*) but also indicating qualities by portraying the behaviour of the character through his or her action and speech (*indirect characterization*).⁵

Some specific issues must be considered in analyzing group characters like the Pharisees.⁶ It is helpful to observe three related aspects:

³ Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse* (11th ed.; München: Fink, 2001), 221–22; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 138: "Characters do not have 'lives'; we endow them with 'personality' only to the extent that personality is a structure familiar to us in life and art."

⁴ James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 121.

⁵ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics, New Accents* (2d ed.; London: Routledge, 2003), 57–71; in detail also Uta Poplutz, "Kleine Leute? Von der narrativen Bedeutung so genannter 'Randfiguren' im Matthäusevangelium," in *Erzählte Welt: Narratologische Studien zum Matthäusevangelium* (ed. Uta Poplutz; BThSt 100; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2008), 57–100.

⁶ Uta Poplutz, "Volk – Jünger – Autoritäten: Überlegungen zur Konzeption und Charak-

1. The *designation*⁷ of the group distinguishes it from other entities in the story world and is a hint to the connective feature that combines single characters into a group character. With the naming as οἱ Φαρισαῖοι⁸ they belong to “the Jews” and are related to them in function as Jesus’ opponents. They also play a privileged role, signalled by the “Weltwissen” (world knowledge) of the ancient readers as well as by the way the Pharisees act within the story. In the narrated world, they are allied with the chief priests and gather council with them (John 11:45–53, 57), are consulted on specific cultic questions like the Sabbath observance (John 9:13–16), and control the synagogue and the judicial process by which opposing members are expelled (John 12:42–43). As we have seen in John 1:19, 24, they send delegations,⁹ so we can presume that they are an officially powerful group. Because the readers develop a character model on the basis of the information given in the text and their preformed “Weltwissen,” they understand the Pharisees as the most important representatives of Judaism in the Fourth Gospel, second only to the chief priests. The synoptic comparison confirms this: while the Sadducees and scribes are integral to the plots of the other Gospels, John excludes the Sadducees from his plot altogether and hardly mentions the scribes.¹⁰ They only occur in connection with the Pharisees in John 8:3, a non-Johannine interpolation.¹¹

2. The *identity*¹² of the group character in the narrative is pivotal for its constitution. They have to be portrayed in such a way that they may be identified by the reader as the same wherever they appear in the narrative.

terisierung von Figurengruppen im Matthäusevangelium,” in *Erzählte Welt* (ed. Poplutz), 101–39.

⁷ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 131: “Names are deictic, that is, pointing, marked out as definite, (‘de-finited’) or cut out of infinity, hypostatized, and catalogued (be it ever so minimally). Thus, narratives do not need proper names in the strict sense.” With regard to the function of names for the characterization, cf. Thomas Koch, *Literarische Menschendarstellung: Studien zu ihrer Theorie und Praxis* (Retz, La Bruyère, Balzac, Flaubert, Proust, Lainé) (Romanica et Comparatistica 18; Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1991), 129–31; David R. Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Biblical Interpretation Series 27; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 10–12.

⁸ They occur in the following scenes and roles. As acting characters: John 7:32, 45–52; 8:3–9, 13–21; 9:13–17, 40–41; 11:46–53, 57; 12:19; as background information: John 1:24; 4:1; 12:42–43; 18:3; as single characters: John 3:1 (also 7:50; 19:39). For comparison: “the Pharisees” occurs twelve times in Mark, thirty times in Matthew, twenty-seven times in Luke, and nine times in Acts.

⁹ John 5:33; 7:32; 18:24; Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 131: “From the very beginning, therefore, there is the hint that the Jewish authorities are rival ‘senders.’”

¹⁰ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (The Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 188, fn. 25: “The Pharisees in John fill the roles of the Markan scribes and Pharisees.”

¹¹ Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12* (RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 2009), 548–53.

¹² “Identity” is not an ontological or semantic category but the linguistic construction of a character by means of communicative references: The reader has to be told of which character

For the Pharisees, this is achieved with their designation and by presenting them as types, involving a specific categorization. As “types” they have limited traits and qualities so that the reader can recognize them easily. This is essential for group characters because they consist of several individuals that must nevertheless speak and act as a single one.¹³ In the case of the Pharisees this is achieved by the fact that the narrator does not use complicated traits.

There is a second, closely related aspect to be mentioned in this context: the “social categorization” of the Pharisees as a collective. I mean by this the fact that the Pharisees are subject to strict role assignments, both with regard to their characterization and their dramatic function as a group. As “Pharisees” they belong to the group of “the Jews” as well as to their own group (the so-called “group category”), and their most often invoked dramatic function is their acting as “opponents” to the main character, Jesus (the so-called “role category”). The fact that the Pharisees’ own group category is so strongly delineated here is the main reason why the already mentioned narrative blurring of lines between the Pharisees and “the Jews” can occur: because of certain behaviours by the group, which are easily recognizable to recipients, the labels “Pharisees” and “Jews” can oscillate. A less attentive reader will not necessarily pick up on this subtlety at all.

In fact, it is difficult to separate “the Jews” precisely from the Pharisees, and in several episodes they are synonymous. In addition to the aforementioned interrogation of John the Baptist (John 1:19–28), the narrator also uses the two designations interchangeably in chapter 8. In 8:13, Jesus debates with the Pharisees (8:13–19, 21), but “the Jews” answer him in 8:22. From 8:28 it is clear that “the Jews” are the elites from Jerusalem who are, from the narrator’s perspective, responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Both designations can be used as synonyms. Likewise, the Pharisees and “the Jews” are one and the same in John 9:13–41. But elsewhere the narrator differentiates the two groups: as John 11:45–47 shows, both character groups can be perceived separately.¹⁴

On the basis of these techniques and the limited character information, a coherent identity of character groups emerges. The reader can imagine the “typical Pharisee,” a model completed with text-external information. That the coalitions between the groups change is rooted in the said ambiguity while simultaneously demonstrating their fundamental belonging to the all-encompassing character group of “the Jews.”

3. One must also consider the *assignment* of single characters to the group. In John’s Gospel, this is important for the only Pharisee who is mentioned by name.

is spoken about, cf. Fotis Jannidis, *Figur und Person: Beitrag zu einer historischen Narratologie* (Narratologia 3; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 147.

¹³ Jack D. Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 9: “Groups of persons ... may function as a single character.”

¹⁴ See Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 41.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a leader (ἄρχων) of the Jews (John 3:1; cf. 3:10; 7:50; 19:39).

Because of his denomination as “Pharisee and leader,” he is introduced as a representative of the group. This means that he must be taken into account for the characterization of the Pharisees as a group character. But one must question whether he acts as an individual character that represents the collective or whether he serves as a renegade to show that the group is not completely homogeneous.

Analysis: The Pharisees in the Gospel of John

The Pharisees as a Powerful Religious Authority

The Pharisees are introduced in John 1:19, 24 as a very influential group of “the Jews”: they have not entered the stage of the narrative yet, but the reader is informed that the Pharisees can act with power and influence through others, like the delegation. The local link to Jerusalem (John 1:19) underlines this assessment. This background information is the first indicator of the privileged status of the Pharisees.

In John 1:24 as well as in other central passages like 7:32 or 18:3, the Pharisees, in these cases together with chief priests, send out delegations to lay hold of Jesus. The Pharisees control the temple police¹⁵ and are well-informed about what is happening in the crowd, even what is spoken in secret.¹⁶ Even the leaders (ἄρχοντες, John 12:42), people in higher positions, stand in awe of them and are afraid to confess their faith in Jesus openly.

Two conclusions emerge from these incidents: the Pharisees have enough personal or institutional power to command supporting staff to seek information and execute orders, and they are distant from Jesus. In sending delegations or servants they avoid confrontation with and being questioned by Jesus.¹⁷ As John 7:45–52 illustrates, this causes arguments between the senders and the sent. Both the returning servants and Nicodemus, who come out from the Pharisees, are struck by direct contact with Jesus. Thus, the Pharisees accuse the servants of having also been deceived (John 7:47: μὴ καὶ ὑμεῖς πεπλάνησθε;), and Nicodemus, “one of them” (John 7:50), criticizes the Phar-

¹⁵ Von Wahlde, “Religious Authorities in the Fourth Gospel?,” 233, fn. 6.

¹⁶ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium: Teil 2: Kommentar zu Kapitel 5–12* (HTKNT IV; Freiburg: Herder, 2001), 206: “Die Pharisäer haben guten Kontakt zum Volk, sind überall anwesend und hören das Gerede der Leute.”

¹⁷ It is the same principle in John 4:1: “Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John ... he left Judea and departed again for Galilee.” The Pharisees’ distance to Jesus corresponds to his leaving in John 4:1. This is a sort of background information for the characterization.

isees. The law, he reminds them, does not judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he has really done (John 7:51). This implies that the Pharisees as guardians of the law do not act according to the law themselves. Predictably, the open-minded servants and sceptical Nicodemus provoke vituperation from the Pharisees: they realize that Jesus has the power to convince. They eventually cry out in frustration:

“You see that you are gaining nothing! Look, the world has gone after him!” (John 12:19)

John 9:13–16 characterizes the Pharisees as an institution that observes the religious order. This order may be threatened by Jesus, as exemplified by his healing the man born blind on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees exert the authority of summoning the accused to a hearing (John 9:18, 24), which causes fear among participants, even the leaders (John 9:22; 12:42). An atmosphere of fear accompanies this group that both wields and is jealous for power.

The Pharisees’ vulnerability is further manifested in John 11:45–53. Some of “the Jews” who have come to Mary and witness the resurrection of Lazarus (cf. John 11:19) report this to the Pharisees. Consequently, the “chief priests and Pharisees” gather a council (John 11:47: *Συνήγαγον οὖν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι συνέδριον*).¹⁸

As in the Synoptic accounts, the chief priests are named prior to the Pharisees¹⁹ (cf. John 7:32), but the latter play a special role as addressees for news, even of denouncing content. Perhaps, as a movement of laymen, they were easier to address than the distinguished upper class Sadducees, for example. The Pharisees thus provided a link between the people and the priestly aristocracy. In this position they exerted considerable influence in both directions.

However, there seems to be a growing consensus that the Pharisees in Jesus’ time had the power of influence rather than control. They were not only able to influence the common people but also those who had the power of control and policy making. We therefore include the Pharisees among the religious authorities, though not as the main leaders.²⁰

In John 12:42–43, the Pharisees also appear as a normative authority, pronouncing that members who have turned toward Jesus be excluded from the synagogue. Here they can even have their way against members of the Sanhedrin, proving their influence.

¹⁸ “‘Gathered council’ implies a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling authority in Jerusalem other than Romans, but the absence of the definite article suggests that it may not have been a formal meeting of the whole body” (J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* [NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010], 648).

¹⁹ Cf. John 7:45; 11:57; 18:3.

²⁰ Cornelis Bennema, “The Identity and Composition of ΟΙ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΟΙ in the Gospel of John,” *TynBul* 60 (2009): 239–63, here 246–47.

Overall, the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees gradually increases throughout the course of the Fourth Gospel. Though they keep their distance initially, the Pharisees become increasingly more engaged in direct confrontation. However, their prominence tapers off during Jesus' passion. They are frequently mentioned in chapters 7–10, whereas the chief priests dominate the Sanhedrin and thus the action taken against Jesus from ch. 11 onwards (diff. John 7:45–52).

While the Pharisees first act by means of delegations (cf. John 1:24; 7:32), they step into direct confrontation with Jesus for the first time in John 8:12–20.²¹

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying: I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. So the Pharisees said to him: You are bearing witness about yourself; your testimony is not true (σὺ περὶ σεαυτοῦ μαρτυρεῖς· ἡ μαρτυρία σου οὐκ ἔστιν ἀληθής!) (John 8:12–13)

The Pharisees act according to judicial standards when they state that Jesus' claim to be the "light of the world" has no credibility without witnesses. Such testimony is not valid in court. Their expertise fuels this legal debate.²² However, as with the chief priests, their underlying intention is to arrest and kill Jesus rather than uphold the law (John 7:32, 47; 11:53, 57; 18:3).

It is striking that the Pharisees play no role in the Johannine passion narrative. This further illumines their character: they take a leading part regarding religious questions and have great influence over the people, but they do not represent the highest religious-political authority among "the Jews." This position is undoubtedly held by the chief priests, with whom the Pharisees are allied throughout the Gospel. The chief priests probably replace the Synoptic Sanhedrin, the council of chief priests, elders, and scribes, but they do not surpass it.

The consequent nominal priority of the chief priests in alliances and the leading part they take in the passion events demonstrates that the narrator regards the chief priests as the leading Jewish elite.²³

²¹ John 8:3–11 is a non-Johannine interpolation.

²² Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, 191: "Usually the Pharisees do not legitimate Jesus by treating him as an equal. Rather, they maintain a superior position based on social recognition on their learning, their influence with the people and their political power in conjunction with the chief priests."

²³ A. J. Saldarini, "Pharisees," *ABD* 5:289–303, here 297: "That they are not the highest authorities is clear in the account of Jesus' condemnation to death, during which the Pharisees drop from view. Thus, John follows the Synoptic Gospels in the passion account in assigning the highest leadership and contact with the Romans to the chief priests."

The Pharisees as a Consistent Group Character

The Pharisees are not easily set apart from the circle of “the Jews” as an independently acting group because of their lack of narrated character traits and vague designation. Therefore, the issue of delimiting the Pharisees as a consistent, homogeneous group from a narratological perspective is yet to be dealt with more precisely.

The only Pharisee who notably steps out of the group character and is introduced by name is Nicodemus, who is a member of the Jewish authority (John 3:1). Although a distanced attitude is characteristic behavior of the Pharisees toward Jesus early in the Gospel, Nicodemus acts contrary to the stereotype: he seeks out Jesus and engages in an intimate conversation with him at night. Nicodemus appears twice more in the Gospel: in 7:50–51, defending Jesus’ right to a hearing before the Pharisees, his own group, and in 19:39, bringing myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus.

Since Nicodemus is explicitly referred to as ἄνθρωπος ἐκ τῶν Φαρισαίων, as one of the Pharisees, in John 3:1, his characterization must represent the entire group.²⁴ Further passages support this conclusion. First, John 7:40–53, a narratively elaborate passage, must be taken into account again. 7:43 mentions that the different opinions about Jesus have caused “a division” (σχίσμα) among the people, which even threatens to affect the servants sent by the chief priests and Pharisees (John 7:46: “No one ever spoke like this man!”). Because the servants, fascinated by Jesus’ speech, have not fulfilled their task of seizing him, the Pharisees rebuke them in 7:47–48:

“Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him?”

With a note about Nicodemus the narrative reveals that this assessment of the situation is not fully correct (John 7:50):

Nicodemus, who had gone to him [sc. Jesus] before, and *who was one of them*, said to them ...

Nicodemus carries the external division among the people right into the ranks of the Pharisees. It is unclear whether Nicodemus has come to believe in Jesus primarily as a consequence of their nighttime conversation or later interactions (John 3; 19:39).²⁵ Nevertheless, this passage adds to the growing characterization of the Pharisees. They are not an isolated group, as is shown by the character of Nicodemus, who belongs to three different groups at once. He is a

²⁴ The preposition ἐκ signals the connection with the group character.

²⁵ Instead Nicodemus is shown (John 2:23–25) as one of the “many” sympathizers of Jesus who come to him because of the “signs,” cf. Jörg Frey, *Die eschatologische Verkündigung in den johanneischen Texten* (vol. 3 of *Die johanneische Eschatologie*; WUNT 117; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 255.

Pharisee and one of the leading authorities, but he is also, though limited by the “signs,” a believer in Jesus. Nicodemus even defends him before the Pharisees who wish to do away with him quickly.

Here the dual consideration of the Pharisees as both individuals and a type yields further insight: the division regarding Jesus that has splintered the people (John 7:43; also 11:45–46) also infects the Pharisees. This shows that they are more closely associated with the people than with the aristocracy of chief priests, as hinted at in John 7:32.

In John 12:42 the Pharisees’ statement from 7:48 is once again exposed as wrong judgment or even a lie:

Nevertheless, many even *of the authorities* believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it ...

Could this be a reference to Nicodemus, who is then marked as a crypto-Christian, one who came to believe in Jesus but feared to confess to the larger group?

However, the Pharisees are no homogeneous entity, a description they have in common with “the Jews.” This is also revealed in 9:16. When the man born blind shows himself healed to the Pharisees, their reactions to Jesus vary considerably:

Some of the Pharisees said: “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But *others* said: “How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?” And there was a division (σχίσμα) among them.

Here the division among the group is addressed explicitly. The continuation of the story in 9:39–41 is interesting, for it mentions “*some of the Pharisees near him.*” Although this might simply indicate that some Pharisees were standing near Jesus, an inconsistency of location on a narrative level suggests a deeper interpretation. In 9:34 the Pharisees have sent away the healed man, yet in the next verse Jesus finds him again. So where do the Pharisees come from, of whom it is said:

Some of the Pharisees near him (μετ’ αὐτοῦ) heard these things, and said to him: “Are we also blind?” (John 9:40)

It is not unlikely that this verse once more hints at the division among the group of the Pharisees. Is John indicating that not only some of the authorities but also Pharisees might be found among Jesus’ followers, maybe to learn more like Nicodemus?²⁶

The narrator does not report this explicitly, therefore these considerations are only speculative. Nevertheless, the text does support the idea of a group

²⁶ Cf. John 1:39–40: “So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him (παρ’ αὐτῷ) that day ...”; also John 11:16.

that is not homogeneous, thus allowing for both Nicodemus and the internal debate surrounding Jesus.

It is reasonable to treat the Pharisees, including Nicodemus, as one consistent group. Thus, the renegades, the critics, and those who belong to different groups also contribute to the characterization of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees are styled as opponents of Jesus, but their ranks are not closed. This allows for the historical question of whether the character of Nicodemus and the disputing Pharisees serve as an affirmation of and reference to the situation in the Evangelist's community. Did the Christians of the Johannine community view the powerful Pharisees, who dominated the restructuring of the Jewish society after 70 C. E. and were considered the prototypical Jewish opponents, as the impenetrable front that had caused their traumatic expulsion from the synagogue? Or were there individuals who, if not convinced by the Christian faith, could at least be regarded as genuinely interested interlocutors in a discussion?

Conclusion

By means of alternating group compositions (the Pharisees alone, together with the chief priests or the scribes, or "the Jews") the narrator counteracts a differentiated perception of the larger group, "the Jews." Consequently, the reader perceives the Pharisees, together with "the Jews," as massive opposition to Jesus who voice their lack of understanding along defined, typical lines.

Nevertheless, what I think has not always been perceived is that this conclusion is qualified by the Pharisees' not always acting and speaking with one voice as a *single character*.

We presuppose that within a limited set of narrated character traits, each detail is likely to be meaningful. Therefore, the vagueness of designation concerning the group of Pharisees can be interpreted as intentional and thus significant.

In addition to the construction of a threatening opposition to Jesus, group relevance is created.²⁷

If we read John's Gospel as a "*grand récit*" ("master narration"), the group relevance is obvious. The author tells his version of the story of Jesus on the basis of experience: his experience in the community and that of the narrated time. Furthermore, he generates a new experience for his recipients. A memory is established, and, more than that, the narrator creates a new collective awareness.

²⁷ Barbara Schaff, "Erzählen und kollektive Identität," in *Handbuch Erzählliteratur: Theorie, Analyse, Geschichte* (ed. Matias Martínez; Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), 89–97, here 90.

The character group of the Pharisees plays an important role in this context. The Pharisees are the ones to advance the plot of the Gospel, and yet they represent the opponents in John's own community. As characters, they stand for all that the local synagogue had to experience and endure, paralleling Jesus' earlier experience. The imprecise alternation of the terms "the Jews" and "the Pharisees" is then no coincidence but rather reflects the perception of the Johannine community at the end of the first century C. E. Where Pharisaic Judaism claims the leading role, the terms are interchangeable: "the Jews" and "the Pharisees" are one and the same. Clear character delimitations are redundant and would be counterproductive for the narrative strategy.

Because the literary representation of social groups like the Pharisees is situated between fictionality and extra-textual references, the narrative of the Gospel has a stabilizing effect.

It exerts a mimetic sociocultural function by legitimizing existing social groups. The group of the Pharisees has always posed a threatening opposition to Jesus and Christians. The community's present experience of threat is therefore by no means new but linked with the decision to follow Jesus. At the same time, the opposition crumbles through a division within. Here a subtle thread of hope is woven into the difficult situation of the time. There is no doubt that the Pharisees are the most influential opponents regarding the history of the community,²⁸ but this does not have to be the last word. Maybe the time would come when one of the leaders joins the Christian community and a Pharisee like Nicodemus would not come to Jesus secretly but rather openly and confess his faith. Obviously, this also strikes a slightly ironical note.

²⁸ Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees*, 197: "The Pharisees were a major opposition group for the johannine community because some Pharisees had great influence in Jerusalem and so some control of who was accepted as a Jew in good standing and allowed into the assembly (synagogue)."