



# The Divine Preservation of Salvation in John's Gospel: A Social Scientific Reading

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## Abstract

One characteristic of John's community as evidenced in the Gospel of John, is its awareness of social identity categories –the insiders are God's children while the non-believers are children of Satan who are symbolised by darkness. It is within this prism that John discusses the concept of divine preservation. The task of this study was to define and explain divine preservation of salvation and its identity implication within John's community. Instead of the dominant theological perspective, this study takes a sociological reading that seeks to construct the social context from within which John gives instruction and then reads his theology in the context of identity formation. In the past and in most theological seminaries, the dominant approach is the theological lens –seeing the subject as God protecting the church from Satan until the *Parousia*. While similar readings could be further pursued, a sociological reading based on social identity theory may ultimately prove more fruitful in revealing the internal dynamics within John's community. The context of Ephesus and its religious plurality of Artemis, Emperor Worship, Cybele mystery cults and Asclepius are all explained as a basis upon which John carves out the identity of his community. From this context, divine preservation of salvation is predicated upon the following: the idea that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the reality of threat from the enemy, the presence of the λόγος, (Word) Holy Spirit and the nearness of the *Parousia*. The study seeks to add to the discussion regarding implications of identity categorisation and ethnicity within a context of globalisation and multiculturalism in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Identity, categorisation, John's community, Asclepius, Apollo, Emperor worship

## Introduction

John's community located in Ephesus had to define its identity within a context characterised by multiplicity of beliefs and gods (Van den Heever, 1992:89, DeSilva, 1992:273). In presenting his case, John talks about divine preservation –imagining his community as being faced by real existential enemy and yet being protected by a powerful deity –Jesus and the promise of the Holy Spirit. The study unpacks internal and external dynamics facing John's community. In reading through the gospel, there is a strong sense of boundary control between those within the community and those outside (DeSilva, 1992). How is divine preservation of salvation used as identity marker to label the identity of John's group? The study defines John's understanding of salvation then explores his social context. Finally, John's understanding of divine preservation of salvation is explained vis-à-vis the context of John as identity categorisation meant to delineate the community's internal and external boundaries.

## John's view of Salvation

John understands salvation in concrete terms –as being removed from those that are not part of his community. Salvation is being quarantined from the rest and receives special treatment



of God's election and spirit within John's community. The best text to illustrate this is John's use of the Shepherd or keeper analogue. In John 10:1-16, John remembered Jesus' illustration regarding the sheep and the gatekeeper who is also the shepherd. In this story, John uses several metaphors to explain salvation. For example, salvation is explained as having the door opened for the sheep/believer who then received exclusive protection from the 'thieves, bandits and wolves 10:1, 12. Noticeable from John is the characterisation of κλέπτῃς, ληστῆς and λύκων –all indicating presence of danger and lack of safety. Associated with all this is the loss of property or even life. Taking this exegetical and contextual meaning, salvation for John is being removed from the situation of danger and having one's life secured by Jesus.

### **Description of the Enemy/the Outsiders**

One major question arises – which is what was the context of John and the location and circumstances that shaped his message. John's community lived in Ephesus –a place vibrating with various religious and cultural movements. By the beginning of the first century, Ephesus had surpassed Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis as the capital city of the province. Located on the harbour, it had all the futures of a great city –the stadium, the amphitheatre, the road pavements and the Emperor temple. It the largest shrine of Artemis – the fertility goddess of the ancient Greek pantheon. Pilgrims from all over Asia would throng to the valley of Ephesus to celebrate and partake in the festivities of the famous goddess – Artemis (Brinks, 2009:776). The goddess was known for being the guardian of fertility of crops, animals and also humans. At the shrine, the priests would welcome the adherents with choral music and fragrant incense. Those whose problems were solved by the goddess would lure the newcomers with testimonies concerning the power of the goddess. At that juncture in history, religion was an open market –individuals would go from one god to the other depending on a need and the apparent effectiveness of the deity. After the end of Artemis' celebration, the Emperor Cult procession would begin. Roman Emperors believed that they were the incarnation or embodiment of the Olympian gods such as Zeus, Apollo and many others. In celebration of their divine power, major Roman cities such as Antioch and Ephesus would build temples in honour of the Emperor. During the Emperor's visit or on a designated day, the regional Roman representative would convene celebrations in honour of the Emperor. During this renowned day, poets such as Aristides and Pinder would compose songs and poems to celebrate the Emperors power (Portefaix, 1993:195). Emperor worship had two distinct functions – to remind the citizens concerning the divine power of the Emperor and for patronage. Regions that did not recognise and celebrate the divinity of the Emperor would be regarded as cites of potential insurrection (Portefaix, 1993:195, Harland, 1996:319).

Besides Artemis and Emperor worship, in the mountains at Pergamum was the famous shrine of Asclepius –the revered god of healing (Horstmanshoff, 2004). He was famous to such an extent, that his sons Machaon and Pondarilios were also famous for healing. His fame was beyond comprehension –several cities such as Tiberius and Siphorius in Palestine adopted Asclepius as their healing god (Edelstein and Edelstein, 1998). In Pergamum at Asclepius' temple, visitors and dignitaries came from afar to seek healing from various diseases. Large water baths and priests who were interpreters of dreams made the shrine an unpredictable attraction. During the night, visitors to the shrine would witness the apparitions of Asclepius and the fortune would converse with his in their dreams (Edelstein and Edelstein, 1998). By morning the priests took turns to interpret the dreams and entertain the visitors with chorus music. As the visitors departed, they would continue in the same mood –praising Asclepius for his healing powers and grace.

### **John and Identity Formation**

Being surrounded by such famous religious shrines and performances, John needed to curve out identity for his community. How did he do it? John has four ways to explain divine preservation and most of these are explainable through exegesis of John chapter 10:1-18. To



understand or theorise how John rationalised about divine preservation, the sociological theory of identity perspective is crucial. Identity perspectives have a long history from the time of Henry Tajfel who proposed that groups form their identity based on distinguishing themselves from other groups which are seen as different from them (Tajfel, 1978, Nash, 2008:1). This is termed identity categorisation. The inner group would have a mentality of 'us against them'. The 'them' is seen as being opposed to and not sharing same vision as the 'us'. Critics of identity categorisation think that identity formation should not be simplified into two categories, instead group members while they have overarching identity that defines them, have multiple or overlapping identities (Nash, 2008:1). This is called the intersectional theory of identities. Given his context characterised by religious pluralism, how did John use 'divine preservation of salvation' as identity tag for his community?

### **Divine preservation is based on Christ –the Shepherd**

From the beginning of his gospel, John presents Jesus as the *logos* from God that comes to cast away the 'darkness' on earth. The term *logos* means word and in Greek philosophy it means the essence; that which defines the core of a thing. With reference to John, it meant that Jesus was of the same essence with God. Greek culture believed that the spiritual world such as gods can extend their presence by being incarnate into material objects making such object holy or 'holy man' or 'son of God' (Tobin, 1990:252). Residing within Hellenistic culture, John imagines Jesus as God's *pneuma*. Besides a few Jews in Colossae and Hierapolis, the majority of the people in the region were Greeks. Both the Jews and Romans that were found in the city had already assimilated into the Hellenistic culture. At the onset of his narrative, John announces, saying, 'and the word become flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son' (John 1:14). Consequently, Jesus is that which gives the world its essence (Tobin, 1990:252, Waetjen, 2001:265). John build upon this argument throughout his books with various images and metaphors. One such powerful metaphors is that Jesus is the shepherd. Shepherds or gatekeepers played crucial role in ancient cities.

To keep the city safe, keepers at the entrance and various strategic places guarded cities such as Ephesus. It was the duty of a keeper to announce aspects for example, concerning impending danger towards the city. The same metaphor was used in relation to shepherd who was a keeper of sheep and other domestic animals (Gan, 2007). Importantly the keeper wards-off danger. Taking this metaphor, John announces that his community has a keeper – Jesus. However, in labelling Jesus as a keeper yet also as God's *Logos*, John seems to be deconstructing the idea that a keeper serves the rulers. However, importantly John is underscoring the importance of the community. Seemingly, John may be using the cultural ideas of gods looking over people and cities. Aretologies or praise to gods such as Apollo were sung, praising them for their ability to guard cities and keeping individuals from danger. Similarly, John argues that Jesus, like a vigilant shepherd, guards the community and keeps it safe. The importance of John's community is seen in that it is protected by God's own *Logos* – Jesus (Park, 1999). "*Logos* theology was a foundational concept from the days of the early church.." (Peltier, 2019).

Verse 11 is crucial in understanding identity formation based on the notion of the "good shepherd". Jesus says, ἐγὼ εἶμι ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός. ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλὸς τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ τίθησιν ὑπὲρ τῶν προβάτων. The good shepherd lays down his life on behalf of the sheep. Contextually, it was the duty of the shepherd to protect the defenceless sheep by warding-off the predators. Christologically, the verse was interpreted as reference to Jesus' death and atonement. However from an identity formation perspective, the verse is crucial in reminding the insiders that within John's community, the believers have protection and that they are following the true leader –Jesus. Laying down one's life on behalf of the sheep or the community is a true example of true leadership which the community member would not find elsewhere.



In terms of identity formation, John is making his community feel more important than other religious groups. It is as if he asking his community a rhetorical question, saying, 'who has the best keeper?' While other groups are protected by human god such as Apollo and Asclepius or the Emperor, John's community is guarded and protected by God's *Logos*. John's characterisation of Jesus as omniscient, and omnipotent cements the identity formation that his community was precious. Unlike Apollo and Asclepius whose apparitions appear during the night or in dreams, John's community always has the divine *Logos* with them. He came from heaven specifically to be with them and being their guardian. Such a favour cannot be compared to any religious group. Here John is cementing the identity tag that his group is a chosen one, special and highly important. It is for their special wellbeing and safety that the cosmos sends a keeper only for them (Quasten, 1948:1).

### **Divine preservation is predicated on the reality of the threat of the enemy**

Having convinced his community concerning their special identity as God's chosen *laos* or people, John shifts attention to those outside. Still in John 10, John characterised the other religious leaders to whom his community may want to backslide and follow as thieves, robbers and wolves. By characterising the outsiders as such, John repeats his rhetorical device of viewing the other as representative of darkness, and danger. While John is not explicit regarding who he had in mind, but given the plurality of religions and shrines, from a reader response perspective, he invokes the characters of Artemis and Asclepius or the gods associated with the Emperor worship. Were such religious movement true to John's description? Peltier (2019) notes "A remarkable feature of John's Prologue is that it introduces eternal concepts that would have been entirely amenable with the writings of ancient Hellenistic philosophers, pagans (particularly early Gnostics), Jews, and Greeks until the reader reaches verse 14, when "the Word became flesh" and thus "we have seen His glory."

Identity formation based on categorisation are based on creating strong boundaries of insiders and outsiders. Hence, the tag concerning thieves, robbers and wolves that describes the outsiders, functions so as to create strong distinction between the insiders and outsiders. If John could be listened to, he is saying, 'do not go outside and join them'. To make this warning more louder, he needs strong language to characterise the outsiders as robbers, and wolves. True to their metaphor, John explains saying, (v12) 'He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them'. Noticably, μισθωτὸς is distinctly juxtaposed to ποιμήν. The true ποιμήν sees (θεωρεῖ) which is the metaphor for the true shepherd. He sees the wolf (λύκον) approaching and protects the sheep. In contrast the hired servant, because he does not own the sheep, upon seeing the wolf, he ἀφίησιν τὰ πρόβατα καὶ φεύγει καὶ ὁ λύκος ἀρπάζει αὐτὰ καὶ σκορπίζει (O'Grady, 1978:86).

It is not clear whether John is only referring to the outsiders or there was internal conflict within his community that caused leadership contestation. However, John succeeded in raising the alarm –that those who are not caring are like wolves, and they will not care for the community. From a reader response criticism, the community members would raise their trust towards being in the community because it is here that they receive protection. Any attempt to join other communities and religious communities would result in danger and death. Importantly, for John, to be in his community is a matter of life and death. The community members should stay within the community. Moving outsider is exposing oneself to extreme danger and death. By juxtaposing the robber/wolf to ἀρπάζει αὐτὰ καὶ σκορπίζει (snatching and scattering), John succeeded in creating the strong boundary marker that labels the outsider as place of death and darkness. Here John makes a second important point that divine preservation of salvation is awareness of the threat of danger lurking outside (O'Grady, 1978:86).

### **Divine preservation is through the Holy Spirit**

John moves back to addressing the insiders by reminding them that divine preservation is based on the Holy Spirit. Peltier (2019) asserts "...the apostle John did write an evangelical



writing to Greek-speaking readers that presents the arrival of the incarnate *Logos* with His message of grace and salvation. John's purpose statement for the gospel confirms his desire for his readers to respond positively to his gospel message so that, "... you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31)". Scholar such as Jonathan Draper believed that the Spirit as community elder that going to be responsible of the church upon the departure of its founder, while evangelical theologians see the Spirit as the second person of the trinity (Draper, 1992:13, Dube, 2016:1). Whichever the position, it does not take away the fundamental argument that, for John, divine preservation within his community was predicated on the Holy Spirit. John gospel is viewed as the gospel regarding the Holy Spirit. John (Jn 14, 16) has one of the solemn and moving discourse regarding Jesus' farewell to his disciples and here, Jesus gave assurance that on his absence the spirit shall protect the community. In chapter 16:8-15, John details the role of the Holy Spirit, saying,

'And he, when he is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and ye behold me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world hath been judged. I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth: for he shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, these shall he speak: and he shall declare unto you the things that are to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall take of mine, and shall declare it unto you. All things whatsoever the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he taketh of mine, and shall declare it unto you'.

The text that is usually labelled as farewell discourse gives solemn instruction to John's community regarding their survival. One such tool to survive is being under the protection of the Holy Spirit who needs utter obedience. To live in John's community is abiding to the power and obedience to the the Paraclete (Holy Spirit). Daily living is mediated and superintended by the Holy Spirit and any deviation would results in falling out of favour with the divine plan. Some scholars suggest that John's community lived its life similar to Essene communities that had retreated themselves and stayed in the wilderness in places such as Masada, in protest of the political foreign rule over Israel and for spiritual cleansing (Pryke, 1964:483, Atkinson and Magness, 2010:317). If true then, fear of sin, righteousness, truth and holiness were some of the community virtues that bonded the community .

### **Divine preservation is urgent given the imminence of the Parousia**

The last aspect that forms the identity of John's community is a realisation that the *Parousia* is imminent. There is a correlation between the Holy Spirit and the *Parousia*. While the Holy Spirit preserves the community in the interim, He does so with the realisation that the *Parousia* is imminent. Regarding this John reports, saying, 'it is for your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the advocate will not come to you' 16:7...if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also (Jn 14: 3). Some Johannine scholars have argued that by the end of the first century, the urgency of the *Parousia* had lessened and replaced by social responsibility. However, John's remark *καὶ ἐὰν πορευθῶ καὶ ἐτοιμάσω τόπον ὑμῖν* gives a different reality. Here the divine preservation of salvation is predicated on the important promise that *πάλιν ἔρχομαι καὶ παραλήμψομαι ὑμᾶς πρὸς ἑμαυτόν, ἵνα ὅπου εἰμι ἐγὼ καὶ ὑμεῖς ἦτε*. The community members were supposed to live their lives with realisation that the interim is temporary and too short. The departure of Jesus or community leader did not end their hope for the *Parousia*, instead the leader shall come and take them and relocate them somewhere.

In terms of identity formation, this promise builds on their earlier truth that they are important. Now that the community leader promises them further exclusion from the rest of the society, it makes them feel more important. To be taken to a place of solace and tranquillity would



increase their resolve to maintain their current exclusive stance. Was John talking about the modern evangelical location of paradise or heaven? Being close to the Qumran community in terms of identity, it is plausible that John had a physical location far from the rest of the community in Ephesus. Where such a place is located, no one knows. However, we can plausibly assume that, in terms of identity formation, to be taken away from the rest of the community gave the community members a feeling of consolation and importance.

## Conclusion

This study explores divine preservation of salvation in John and crucial identity issues surface. John is not talking about divine preservation of salvation in a vacuum. Regarding context, he is writing in Ephesus – a context characterised by a multiplicity of religions – including deities and beliefs such as Cybele, Mithraism, Asclepius, Artemis and many others. Religion was an open market and depending on need, one chose the religion that apparently gave a solution to important issues. In such a context, John's adherents were likely to come to house-churches on a given day but also participated in the festivals that were happening on any day or week. John was facing a crisis of identity –how did he keep his members to his new religion of Jesus proclaimed by Paul during his continuous stay in the city of Ephesus? For John, divine preservation of salvation was not mere theological rhetoric. Instead, it meant being kept away from what he thought would corrupt the internal dynamics of his community. To do this, John had four approaches. Internally he instructs that they are being kept by the caring Shepherd – Jesus who is unlike 'wolves and thieves'. Secondly, he shifts the attention to outsiders whom he castigates as danger lurking to destroy them. Third, the community is viewed as the interim help of the *Paraclete* and lastly, the community needed to know that they would be taken to a far safer place.

Having reached this conclusion, the question is –what were the implications of John's divine preservation of salvation? First, John's remarks regarding salvation are exclusive –John is talking to inside members who believe or are persuaded by his theology. For John, the universe is premised on the idea of an exclusive God who sends his *Logos* to be the light in a dark world. Secondly, John's remarks regarding divine preservation of salvation has implications towards multiculturalism, migration and ethnicity. Does John promote multiculturalism and plural ethnicity? Seemingly, John promotes a monoculture and prohibits his community members to mingle with those with different beliefs. In view of dangerous doctrines such as apartheid in South Africa and Israel, John suggests nationality or ethnicity based on election or being chosen as God's people. While John reaches out to outsiders such as the Samaritan woman, he does so in order to illustrate divine light that goes out to the world of the unbelievers and not to accept them as those who they Samaritans but rather to convert them. Within a postmodern culture, the challenging question or remark is finding God within our contexts without removing us from our cultures in order to hear God and His divine *Logos*.

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