


# Reading the Fourth Gospel in the COVID-19 pandemic context

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**Dates:**

Received: 15 Oct. 2020

Accepted: 21 Dec. 2020

Published: 23 Mar. 2021

**How to cite this article:**

Thomaskutty, J., 2021, 'Reading the Fourth Gospel in the COVID-19 pandemic context', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6355. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6355>

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The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic situation persuades a reader of the Fourth Gospel to interpret the Scripture in new lights. In the contemporary context, the gospel of John has the potential to attune the attention of the reader towards the existential struggles of the people with myriad interpretative possibilities. The Jews often twinned sinfulness and sickness together, and in that light, they considered Jesus as a social sinner and his followers as a diseased community. The Johannine narrator realigns the struggles of the *Sitz im Leben Kirche* dynamically within the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* to present his defensive rhetoric. The Johannine community was composed of those who suffered quarantine, social isolation, sicknesses, resource deficiencies and continuous cleansing processes in the socio-religious and politico-cultural setting of their life. Jesus as the creator of the universe and the giver of life provides them hope in the midst of suffering and liberates them from the clutches of dehumanisation and marginalisation. A realignment of the *Sitz im Leben COVID-19* within the framework of the *Sitz im Leben Jesu/Sitz im Leben Kirche* would guide us during the difficult times.

**Contribution:** This article contributes to the reader a wider hermeneutical framework and a new way forward in interpreting the Fourth Gospel by taking into consideration the ongoing struggle of humanity across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. As a narrative, contextual and theological interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, the current article fits well within the scope of *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Fourth Gospel; healing; Johannine community; life camp; pandemic; quarantine; resource deficiencies; social isolation.

## Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)<sup>1</sup> pandemic situation created global havoc as it affected the human culture and life system as a whole. As the Jewish community considered both sinfulness and sickness complementary to each other, a reader of the Fourth Gospel can understand the interpretative mechanism underneath the narrative rhetoric. As a sectarian group, the Johannine community was considered as followers of a *socio-religious sinner* called Jesus. As followers of a sinner, they were treated as diseased, and as a consequence a vulnerable group. The current article is an attempt to read the Fourth Gospel in the COVID-19 pandemic context. The following questions will be investigated in that process: How does hermeneutics play a significant role in interpreting the Scripture during the COVID-19 pandemic situation? Has the Johannine community context something to do with the COVID-19 situation? How twinning together of *sinfulness* and *sickness* functions as a weapon of marginalisation and dehumanisation? How does the Fourth Gospel present Jesus' role as a pre-existent *Logos* and the situational issues such as quarantine, social isolation, healing, resource deficiencies, cleanliness or hygienic and 'life or refugee camps' from a Johannine community perspective? How is John's message relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic context? As a student of the Fourth Gospel and as a person who confronts the existent realities of the COVID-19 pandemic situation, I attempt to appreciate a back and forth interaction between the text and the context.

One of the primary hermeneutical intentions of the article is to interpret the Scripture from the vantage point of the existent realities. The contemporary contextual realities persuade the reader to approach the text by making use of the COVID-19 terminologies, conceptual framework and existent realities. On the one hand, I attempt to develop a hermeneutical lens from the present

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1. Englishclub.com defines coronavirus as: 'any one of a large family of viruses that can cause disease in the breathing and eating systems of humans and animals (respiratory and digestive systems). Seen through a microscope, coronaviruses appear circular with spikes, like crowns, and are named from the Latin for crown, which is *corona*'. See <https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/coronavirus-covid19.php>. Corona virus disease 2019 is the official name for the novel Coronavirus Disease that emerged in China in 2019.

contextual realities and, on the other hand, it is an endeavour to look at the contemporary situation from the Johannine outlook. The primary hermeneutical principle used here is emerged out of a text-and-context interlocking. The task of this article is threefold: investigate the relevance of the Scripture as text of 'hope' and 'comfort', understand the peculiar approaches and methodologies of the author or narrator for framing the text as a socio-religious critique and explore the contextual and theological value of the text in today's context.

## Creation narratives

The Johannine community perceived their very existence in closer relationship with the creator of the universe. While the majority community marginalised them and when they were sent out of the Jewish synagogues, they developed an understanding of the God of heavens and his or her dwelling among humanity.<sup>2</sup> Through their belief in the Father-God and the Son-Jesus, they inherited the unique status of 'becoming children of God' (Jn 1:12–13; Schnackenburg 1980:261–262). In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus reveals himself as the agent of creation, preservation and redemption. This aspect is also at view in the Christological hymn of Colossians 1:15–20 (Col 1:15–16: *creation*, Col 15:17–18a: *preservation* and Col 1:18b–20: *redemption*; Brown 2009:603; O'Brien 1993:147–153). Moreover, Christ is presented as the firstborn over all creation, first principle of reality and firstborn from the dead (Achtmeier, Green & Thompson 2001:409; O'Brien 1993:147–153). The Johannine community developed this understanding of Christ as they were undergoing difficult situations in life. The COVID-19 contextual realities enable us to reconceptualise our existence in relation to the creator of the universe.

The pre-existent nature of the Word is at focus in John 1:1–5 (Anderson 2011:3, 5, 9, 22–23, 68–69, 103–104). Christ's existence 'in the beginning' provides the reader an understanding about the involvement of the Word in the activity of creation (Jn 1:1; Achtmeier et al. 2001:181–182). Jesus' role and status as *the Word*, relationship *with God* and oneness with *God* are the focal points of the narration. The phrase 'in the beginning' is an obvious allusion to Genesis 1:1 (*en arche*, LXX; *bereshit*, MT; Johnson 1992:481–484). John emphasises that the *Logos* was in existence even before the creation of the universe (Brown 2009:337–338). The verse is divided into three simple clauses, each of which contains the imperfect of the verb *einai* ('to be'; Blomberg 2001:71–75). In each of the clauses, the verb has a different meaning. In the first clause, it means 'to exist': 'In the beginning the Word was *in existence*' (Johnson 1992:481–484). In the second clause, the verb 'to be' describes an association – the *logos* was with God in the sense of being in his presence. In the third clause, the verb 'to be' is used in a predication in which the character or essence of the *Logos* is defined – 'The Word was God' (Johnson 1992:481–484). The narrator demonstrates the existent, relational and oneness aspects of

<sup>2</sup>For more details about John's community perspective, see Martyn (1968–1979).

the Word in relation to God. This emphasis was brought to the foreground of the narrative framework in order to foreground their community confession known in public. As the Johannine community members aligned themselves with God or Jesus even in the midst of challenges in life, the contemporary church should get involved in the ministry of comforting and healing the sheepfold and the people outside of the *ekklēsia*.

John 1:3–4 describes the activity of the *logos*. The *Logos* is the agent of creation ('all things came into being through him'), and he is the source of true life that is the light of all people (Thomaskutty 2020:5–6). Later, in the gospel, John expands on this activity of the Word that gives life (Jn 6:35, 48, 51, 58; 11:25) and light (Jn 8:12; 9:1–12; Moloney [1989] 1998:35–36). In 1:14, the narrator describes the incarnation of the *Logos*. Here, John uses a different 'to be' verb (*ginomai*) which, to this point in the prologue he has preserved for created, beings: 'The Word became flesh' (Johnson 1992:482–483). Jesus as the agent of creation reveals himself to the Samaritans that he is 'the Saviour of the world' (Thomaskutty 2020:145–151). In Johannine 6:16–21, the narrator describes the authority of Jesus over the created beings (Moloney [1989] 1998:202–203). While Nathanael acknowledges Jesus as 'Son of God' and 'King of Israel' (Jn 1:49; Thomaskutty 2020:7), Peter declares that Jesus is 'The Holy One of God' (Jn 6:69; Blomberg 2001:130). While Mary Magdalene (Jn 20:18), the disciples (20:25) and the Beloved Disciple (Jn 20:25) acknowledge Jesus as 'the Lord', Thomas announces with intimacy 'My Lord and my God' (Jn 20:28; Thomaskutty 2020:137–138). The *Logos* can be considered as a vertical and continuing divine presence among the afflicted masses in today's context.

The above details describe the following aspects: (1) the Johannine community conceptualised Jesus both as the *pre-existent Logos* and the *incarnated Logos* (Schnackenburg 1980:221–273); (2) their unique understanding of Christ and the interpretation of the Christ-event were developed in a context in which they were religiously dehumanised and marginalised; (3) their understanding that Christ is *Our Creator*, *Our Preserver* and *Our Redeemer* enables them to be hopeful even in the midst of challenging situations in life; (4) the existent, relational and oneness aspects of the Son-Jesus in relation to the Father-God enable the believing community to hold their status as the Children of God (Brant 2011:32–33) and (5) the Johannine community endeavoured their best to theologise their existential struggles by placing 'believing in Christ or God' and 'hoping in the midst of existent struggles' as the hermeneutical principles (Martyn 1968–1979). As the Johannine community redefined their theological stimulus contextually, the Christian community in the COVID-19 pandemic context should unlock the grand narratives of the Scripture and focus on the Creator or Preserver or Redeemer God through the lenses of 'believing' and 'hoping'.

## A quarantine narrative

The COVID-19 pandemic situation forces many people to undergo a period of quarantine. *Cambridge Dictionary* defines quarantine as 'a period of time during which an animal or

person that might have a disease is kept away from other people or animals so that the disease cannot spread'.<sup>3</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* explains it as a state of 'isolating diseased people from normal relations or communications'.<sup>4</sup> The Jews often considered illness as a consequence of people's sinfulness. As sinfulness was metaphorically considered a pandemic, illness was also considered a universal phenomenon (Blomberg 2001:150–152). The Johannine community countered this equation between illness and sinfulness within the narrative master plan of the gospel (Jn 9:2, 34; Blomberg 2001:151). Those who come in a closer relationship with the diseased are also considered sinful (Jn 9:16, 24). Jesus breaks the traditional Sabbath regulations, challenges the popular Jewish understanding between sinfulness and illness and takes steps to visit a quarantine centre. This story foregrounds the Johannine community ethos and its ministerial focus even towards the quarantine centres (Jn 5:1–17).

During biblical times, quarantine was strictly observed. Mosaic Law gives instructions concerning people with infectious diseases. Leviticus 13:46 states that as long as a person has infectious disease, she or he remains unclean, must live alone and must live outside the camp. 2 Kings 7:3 warns that people with leprosy were put out of the city gate. A similar situation is narrated in the Fourth Gospel. In biblical times, a person with disabilities was not treated as 'unclean' as in the case of a leper or a person with infectious disease. But John's story gives us an indication that even the people with disabilities were put together in seclusion. Bennema (2009) states that:

He [*the invalid person*] is confined to the portico around a pool called Bethesda, which was reputed to have mystical healing powers (5:2–4), and is probably dependent on others for food and shelter. (pp. 100–101)

The location here is: 'in Jerusalem', 'near the Sheep Gate' and 'by the pool of Bethesda' (Jn 5:2; Beasley-Murray 1999: 71–72). The narrator states that 'a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed' (Jn 5:3). Jesus' interlocutor in this story is counted among the invalid for a period of 38 years (Jn 5:5).<sup>5</sup> Although the water is adjacent, he is unable to take advantage of the miraculous medication. His situation is a prolonged quarantine of 38 years (Beasley-Murray 1999:73–75). He was considered 'unworthy' (hence, he was dumped into this situation); he spent 38 years among 'other disabled' (hence, his thought world was shaped accordingly) and he was put 'outside' the mainstream society (so, he was a marginalised person) (Beasley-Murray 1999:73–75). Jesus transforms his life from a *situation of deadly nature to a situation of life*.<sup>6</sup>

3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines quarantine in the following way: 'separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick'. See <https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/index.html>.

4. See <https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/coronavirus-covid19.php>.

5. According to Jewish law, the human is probably prohibited to worship in the temple. Mishnah *Hagigah* 1:1, for example, states that '[a]ll are liable for an appearance offering [before the Lord] (Ex 23:14; Dt 16:16) except for ... the lame ... and one who cannot go up on foot'. See Bennema (2009:101).

6. Kanagaraj (2005:172) states that, 'Here the word "sin" is not referring to unbelief or rejection of God's self-revelation in Jesus, as it does in other parts of the Gospel.

As a Jew, Jesus was aware of the imposed connection between sinfulness and illness (Jn 5:14).<sup>7</sup> But, as the pre-existent *Logos*, he had authority over both sinfulness and illness. The holistic healing Jesus provides demands a sinless life (Thomaskutty 2015:192–193; Also see Bennema 2009:104). Kanagaraj states that (2005:172), 'Although all sickness is not the direct result of sin, it seems that this particular man's suffering was directly connected to some moral failure' (Moloney [1989] 1998:169, 173). John's community broadly understands (Kanagaraj 2005:172): (1) God or Jesus as the pre-existent *Logos* and the Creator of the universe has control over both sinfulness and illness (Jn 9:2); (2) the glorification of God or Jesus is the ultimate concern of the Johannine community (Jn 2:11); (3) God or Jesus works in situations of illnesses and disasters to control the contexts and to reveal the divine glory (Bennema 2009:105) and (4) quarantine is a situation of missional transformation and ministerial enhancement for the faith community. The quarantine narrative in Johannine 5:1–17 demonstrates a *working* God and a *working* Jesus (Jn 5:17) and a Sabbath-breaking Son of God who heals the diseased in the world (Bennema 2009:106–107; Moloney [1989] 1998:170, 174). The church in today's context should emphasise human transformation and help the diseased to overcome. In that sense, the ritual and religious observances have to be considered secondary to social service during this pandemic context.

## Social isolation narratives

During the COVID-19 period, people are forced to live in isolation. The government and the community regulations instruct everybody to keep away from physical interactions and social gatherings. In the Jewish context, both the so-called 'sinful' and the 'diseased' were isolated from the mainstream society. The following examples from the Johannine text make it obvious to the reader: the invalid person and the other diseased were dumped to that situation as the human explains 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up' (Jn 5:1–2, 7; Blomberg 2001:108–110); the human born blind was considered as a sinner as the Jews associated diseases with sinfulness, and thus, he was suffering from socio-religious marginalisation (Jn 9:1–3; Thomaskutty 2015:313–314); the parents of the human born blind avoided answering the questions levelled against them as they were concerned of their socio-religious status in relation to the Synagogue (Jn 9:20–23)<sup>8</sup>; the human born blind continued his associations with the Synagogue as a socially stigmatised person<sup>9</sup>; and his new declarations and identity in Christ forced the Synagogue authorities to cast him out (Jn 9:34;

.....  
Rather, Jesus is here speaking of evil acts and moral failure, which are themselves rooted in unbelief'.

7. Moloney ([1989] 1998:169) comments that, 'The rabbis associated sin with God's punishment through suffering and death, but in the house of God (cf. 2:16) Jesus speaks in the name of God, breaking this traditional link between the physical and God's punishment'. Cf. Blomberg (2001:110, 151).

8. Blum says that ([1983] 2004: 308), 'The parents shifted the pressure from themselves by noting that their son was of legal age to testify for himself (vv. 21, 23)'.

9. This aspect of his socio-religious stigma is identified through the question of the disciples to Jesus (Jn 9:2).



Bennema 2009:141–143). The Johannine community was a sectarian group who suffered from the stigmatisation levelled against them by the Jews on account of their new faith. The invalid person (Jn 5:1–17) and the human born blind (Jn 9:1–41) exemplify the struggles of the community members. As they were considered ‘sinful’, they were also counted as ‘diseased’.

In the Israelite society, the minorities like the Samaritans and the followers of Jesus suffered social isolation. The narrator states that ‘Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans’ (Jn 4:9b; Blomberg 2001:99–100). The Samaritan woman asks Jesus, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jn 4:9a; Thomaskutty 2015:138–139). The communal conflict between the orthodox Jews and the Samaritans was traditionally justified and even legalised through the means of socio-religious interpretations. The Jews considered the Samaritans as an inferior group based on their racial, moral and religious background. In that sense, the Samaritans were forced to be secluded and geographically excluded from the Jewish territory (Blum [1983] 2004:284). The label of ‘sinful’ attributed to them contributed to their status as ‘inferior’ and social nature as ‘diseased’. After Jesus’ death, his disciples suffered from social isolation as the narrator describes, ‘the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews’ (Jn 20:19; Beasley-Murray 1999:378). A week later, his disciples were again in the same house and the doors were still shut (Jn 20:26; Kanagaraj 2005:649–659; Moloney [1989] 1998:537–539). These narrative annals demonstrate that Jesus’ disciples were in fear of the Jews for a prolonged period of time and they were compelled to live in isolation. The experiences of the Samaritans and the followers of Jesus amply delineate the struggles of the minority communities.

The Jews isolated Jesus on several junctures. The Johannine narrator makes it obvious that Jesus was not considered in par with other religious Jews mainly because of his associations with the sinners and the tax collectors (see Kilgallen 2012:590–600). The unrecognition from the part of the Jews is made clear as the narrator says ‘He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him’ (Jn 1:11; Kanagaraj 2005:50). This aspect of the gospel introduces a grand irony right at the beginning of the narrative framework. The Johannine narrator foregrounds Jesus’ elusiveness on several occasions. People are in search of Jesus (Jn 6:24, 26; 7:11, 34; 8:21), but he is elusive (Stibbe 1993:233). This nature of Jesus within John clearly demonstrates the life-threatening situations and the resultant isolation (Stibbe 1991; Also see Stibbe 1994:34). Although he was accepted by the common people, the mainstream Jewish community never accepted him as part of the culture. The *Sitz im Leben Jesu* further reflected within the *Sitz im Leben Kirche*.

The coming of Nicodemus to Jesus *by night* (Jn 3:2) can be an indication that there was a ban on Jesus, and hence, people were not allowed to associate with him (Thomaskutty 2015:108). Some of the gatherings of Jesus were organised in

remote places (Jn 6:1–15; Kanagaraj 2005:191–197). The narrator of the story states that Jesus went to the festival of the Tabernacles ‘not publicly but as it were in secret’ (Jn 7:10; Blomberg 2001:132). The Johannine narrator makes it clear that as a person suffering from social isolation, Jesus often travelled secretly. This aspect of the Johannine aligns well with the Markan secrecy motif (Jn 1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:24, 36; 8:26, 29–30; 9:9, 30; see Wrede 1971). In John 10:40, the narrator states that Jesus went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising earlier. He goes to this isolated place as the Jews addressed him as demonic (Jn 10:20), took up stones against him (Jn 10:31) and attempted to seize him (Jn 10:39; Thomaskutty 2015:354–367). His social isolation is further exemplified as he takes his disciples and goes across the Kidron Valley (Jn 18:1; Beasley-Murray 1999:321–322). As a friend of the sinners (Jn 5:1–17; 9:28–34), a blasphemer (Jn 8:58–59) and a Sabbath breaker (Jn 5:1–17; 9:1–41), Jesus was considered a *sinner* and a socio-religiously *diseased* personality.

Not only the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* but also the *Sitz im Leben Kirche* experienced social isolation as the community was marginalised as a sectarian group and as followers of a revolutionary called Jesus. As an expelled group from the Synagogue, the Johannine community had to face challenging situations in life such as social marginalisation, issues based on identity and status and risk of rights and privileges. The Johannine community aspects are dynamically expressed through the rhetorical speeches or dialogues of Jesus. The dualistic pattern of the gospel provides insights concerning the ‘hate’ language of the Jews over against Jesus the protagonist and the Johannine community (Thomaskutty 2015:466–467). Their hate language is explicit through their activity of *naming* Jesus a ‘deceiver’ (Jn 7:12), ‘demonic’ (Jn 7:20; 8:48, 52; 10:20–21), ‘Samaritan’ (Jn 8:48) and ‘Son of Joseph’ (Jn 6:42). Other aspects of ‘hate’ language such as *diminution* and *reduction* are also used by them (Jn 6:42, 52; Roy 2002:32). These literary and historical aspects of the gospel provide clues regarding the secluded nature of both the Jesus Movement and the Johannine community. Such a situation of social isolation, the Johannine community members advised to strengthen their moral and spiritual life rooted in the Words and deeds of Jesus. The church in today’s pandemic context should cherish the values and virtues of Christ and also should remain as a community of healing.

## Healing narratives

During the COVID-19 pandemic period, people are affected by various socio-political and religio-cultural issues. At present, people’s physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and financial areas are under deterioration. It is in this context the gnomic and universalistic message of the Fourth Gospel functions as a narrative rhetoric with profound persuasion. The Johannine community was composed of people who were deprived of their rights and privileges because of their association with the so-called socio-religious *sinner* Jesus (Martyn 1968–1979). The Johannine community’s stigmatised socio-religious status and the emotional and psychological breakdowns brought them to

vulnerability. Their psyche was deeply wounded because of the fact that they were treated as marginalised. As Jesus emphasised a ministry of healing, the Johannine community was expected to get involved in holistic healing.

The healing of the Royal man's [*Basilikos*] son reveals the heavenly authority of Jesus (Jn 4:46–54).<sup>10</sup> The narrator states that his son *lay ill in Capernaum* (Jn 4:46b) and *he was at the point of death* (Jn 4:47b; Brant 2011:89–92). The Royal man's mental and emotional instability is made known to the reader as he was travelling 'a considerable distance' (i.e. from Capernaum to Cana) to invite Jesus home (see Schnackenburg 1980:465). The boy's disease was an unusual type and nobody was able to heal him. The unavailability of the doctors, deficiency of medical assistance and the scarcity of medicine would have caused his condition critical. The Royal man's prolonged journey makes it clear that he was not able to find any medical assistance in the region of Capernaum. It is also explained that the boy was at the point of death. The father requests Jesus 'Sir, come down before my little boy dies' (Jn 4:49). From the words of his slaves, it is made clear that the boy was affected by a fever (Jn 4:52; Schnackenburg 1980:467–468). A contemporary reader can even conjecture that it was a kind of corona fever as the Royal man had to travel a long way to find a healer and Jesus was not showing interest to go to his house. Distancing himself from Capernaum and the family of the diseased, Jesus says, 'Go, your son will live' (Jn 4:50, 53; Schnackenburg 1980:467–469). The contagious nature of the disease is made obvious through the narrative signals of the story: the local doctors were not able to address this issue; it was a fever that led to the point of death; the man is in search of an extraordinary physician to address this matter; and Jesus maintained social distancing. But the compelling feature of the story is that the pre-existent *Logos* demonstrates his authority over the disease.

In the story of the invalid by the pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:1–17), the man was in quarantine and was marginalised as a sinner as he was dumped into the situation. He is addressed here as an *invalid* (Jn 5:3) person. As a man who was *lying there* for a long span of time and was *unwell*, the narrator invites the attention of the reader towards his emotional pain and social stigma (Jn 5:6; Brant 2011:103). When he says that *I have no one*, his isolated position all through the 38 years is brought to the foregrounded (Jn 5:7a). When he says *someone else steps down ahead of me*, he delineates his continuous frustration (Jn 5:7b; Brant 2011:103–104). His prolonged quarantine experience is transformed to moments of joy as Jesus intervened in his life. The miraculous power of Jesus over the creation is exemplified through this narrative.

The story of the human born blind is another event of human transformation (Jn 9:1–41). He was born blind and was not recognised in his family setup as well as in the socio-religious institutions. In the society, he was considered as a *sinner* as he was born blind (Jn 9:2). The neighbours merely neglected

him as a 'beggar' because he used to sit and beg (Jn 9:9; Brant 2011:152–153). His parents were not willing to acknowledge his healing in public as they feared the Jews (Jn 9:22). The parents of the man were more concerned of their association with the Synagogue than their kin relationship and the deed of Jesus the benefactor (Jn 9:22; Schnackenburg 1980:250). The Jews interrogated the man continually and attempted their best to put his psyche down. Finally, they threw him out of the Synagogue (Jn 9:34; Witherington 1995:184). Jesus' instruction to wash in the Pool of Siloam clearly gives a clue about the cleansing process as he was considered a sinner and a diseased. As the man was obedient to the instructions of Jesus, he came to a steady progress in his life as a follower of the divine axioms.

Lazarus is a man whom Jesus loved and he was ill (Jn 11:3). Jesus' utterance to the disciples is persuasive in today's context: 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it' (Jn 11:4). The COVID-19 pandemic period reveals the ultimate power of God above and beyond the human capacities. Jesus would have stayed over two more days in the place, firstly, because of the persecution from the side of the Jews, and secondly, because of the contagious nature of Lazarus' illness (Jn 11:6; Witherington 1995:198–199). As the pre-existent *Logos*, Jesus raises Lazarus and convinces the people that he is the resurrection and the life. The Johannine *sēmeion* language is typical as the events of healing are portrayed in symbolical and gnomic language. The Johannine community was exemplifying its identity as a wounded but at the same time a healing group. The healer Jesus was placed at the centre stage in their interpretative endeavours. As a community of healing, they exemplified themselves as a *sēmeion* to the world outside. During this COVID-19 pandemic period, the church should stand on the principles of Jesus and also on the Johannine community ethos to show its identity as a community of holistic care and healing.

## Narratives on resource deficiencies

During this COVID-19 pandemic period, people are facing deficiencies of resources across the globe. More than scarcity of resources, people suffer from the unavailability of food supply and other needed things. The situation became more challenging because of the lack of proper transportation facilities and workforce. Often, the governmental and other agencies faced difficulties in distributing the resources in a fair manner. The quarantine camps and hospitals are occupied by the diseased and the affected people, and the symptomatic people do not receive proper medical care and treatments. The Johannine narrator caricatures some of the similar incidents within his narrative artistry (Martyn 1968–1979). The Johannine community was formed based on the principles of Jesus (who was considered as a *socio-religious sinner* by the mainstream society) and later on developed around the ideals of the beloved disciple (who was a follower of the so-called blasphemer Jesus; Martyn 1968–1979). As a community that was expelled from the Synagogue (Jn 9:22, 34; 16:2), it had a diverse gathering

10. Brant (2011:90) says that, 'Whether the official is a Jew or a gentile or a Herodian or Roman employee is not specified. All that seems to be significant is that he is a member of the elite, a factor that might have reduced the anticipation of pleasure in seeing his son's health restored for John's intended audience.'

from the provinces of Galilee (Jn 2:1–12; 4:46–54), Samaria (Jn 4:1–42; Thomaskutty 2020:145–151), Judea (Jn 2:13–22; ch. 7–8), Ephesus (later on, the community was shifted to the non-Palestinian provinces) and the Greece (Jn 12:20–23). The community was also composed of the marginalised sections such as the invalids (Jn 5:1–17), blind (Jn 9:1–41) and women (Jn 2:1–11; 4:1–26; 11:1–54; 12:1–8; 19:25–27; 20:1–18; Thomaskutty 2020:173–189). As a community of the marginalised, the Johannine community was not in a financially sound position (Martyn 1968–1979). The ethos of the community emphasised the virtue of depending on God or Jesus even in the midst of all sorts of deficiencies.

The wedding banquet in Cana in Galilee was affected from an issue of shortage of wine (Jn 2:1–11). From the narrative annals, a reader can conjecture that it was a wedding of one of Jesus' relatives as he was invited (Jn 2:2), his mother was present as a responsible person (Jn 2:3–5), the disciples were present with him (Jn 2:2, 12) and even his brothers attended the wedding (Jn 2:12; Thomaskutty 2015:80–81). The narrator states that 'the wine was gone' (Jn 2:3a) and Jesus' mother informs him that 'they have no more wine' (Jn 2:3b; Beasley-Murray 1999:34). These narratorial and character expressions amply indicate the shameful situation of the family (Thomaskutty 2015:80–81). In an honour and shame context, the issue of the lack of wine was inviting social disgrace to the family. In a wedding ceremony, sharing the best quality wine was one of the ways of expressing hospitality. As wine was considered as a symbol of 'joy', lack of wine in an auspicious occasion would have invited a situation of 'no joy' (Keener 1993:268). As Jesus' mother was aware of the top secret of the family, she approaches him with the concern (Jn 2:3; Beasley-Murray 1999:34–35). Jesus' response to her is an indication that God alone can intervene in critical junctures as it is now (Jn 2:4; Keener 1993:268). He invites Mary's attention to the resourceful heavens (Jn 2:4). Mary's trust in God or Jesus is further made obvious through her commandment to the servants: 'Do whatever he tells you' (Jn 2:5; Moloney [1989] 1998:66–73). The miraculous nature of Jesus' sign is exemplified through the utterance of the master of the banquet (Jn 2:10; Keener 1993:268–269). The narrative emphasises the following aspects in conspicuous terms: situations of scarcity are inevitable; placing the concerns before God is important in critical junctures, trusting God or Jesus will help us in all (especially in crucial) situations; and God's provisions are in store for those who believe in him. Jesus or God is able to turn the situations of 'lost joy' to 'new joy' (Moloney [1989] 1998:66–73). During the COVID-19 crisis situation, this aspect has to be emphasised.

In Johannine 6:1–15, the event of feeding 5000 people in a remote mountainside is reported with eloquence. The dialogue of the event begins in verse 5b with Jesus asking his disciples: 'where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' The responses of Philip and Andrew (Jn 6:7 and 9) fill the vacuum that was created after Jesus' question (Jn 6:5b). Two ideologies are in conflict here, divine and human (Smith 1999:147). The response of Philip in verse 7 indicates the

limits of human perception over against the perspective of Jesus (Talbert 1992:132). Andrew's introduction of the *paidarion* and the boy's five barley loaves and two fish indicate human limitation before divine power and resources (Jn 6:9). While Andrew's question 'what are they among so many people?' suggests a complete impossibility (Jn 6:9b), Jesus' response 'Make the people sit down' (Jn 6:10a) introduces an imperative of suspense (Smith 1999:147). The exchange develops as Jesus shows his concern (Jn 6:5b), Philip speaks from a human point of view (Jn 6:7b), Andrew adds a probable solution (Jn 6:9) and Jesus initiates his revelation through a sign (Jn 6:10–11). The sign was initiated for feeding the hungry masses (Keener 2003:665; also see Bultmann 1971:213). God's provision for his people during the critical situations is made obvious to the reader. A reader of the gospel can relate the theological and contextual underpinnings of the story in the contemporary COVID-19 situation. The narrator wanted to communicate the message that God is in full control of the cosmic orders and Jesus is the pre-existent *Logos*. Jesus' provision for the hungry is further emphasised in the closing of the gospel as he invites the disciples, saying 'Come and have breakfast' (Jn 21:12; Blomberg 2001:276–277). The Johannine community understood these stories through the lens of their life experiences. The same can be perceived and implemented in today's crisis period.

## Cleansing narratives

Using masks, sanitizers, soaps, disinfectants, towels, gloves and Dettol became customary during this COVID-19 pandemic context than ever before. Now hand washing, regular body washing and cleansing the surroundings receive more attention in our day-to-day routine. People pay more attention on cleaning and disinfection of laundry, bathrooms, kitchen and communal canteens and waste provinces. More water is required in this cleansing process. Johannine theology and community practices take our attention towards several cleansing processes. Water is at the heart of the Fourth Gospel: John's baptism (Jn 1:26–28), turning water into wine (Jn 2:1–11), birth in water (Jn 3:5), baptism by Jesus and John the Baptist (Jn 3:22–24), Jacob's water versus 'the water I [Jesus] will give' (Jn 4:13–14), the miraculous water in the pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:1–17), Jesus' crossing over the water (Jn 6:16–22), rivers of living water (Jn 7:38), the pool of Siloam (Jn 9:7), washing the feet of the disciples (Jn 13:1–20), blood and water coming out of Jesus' body (Jn 19:34) and the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21:1–3).<sup>11</sup> As John presents water as an element of cleansing and transformation, the readers can understand its symbolical value within the narrative framework. The Johannine narrator cautions the readers to use the material water for outwards cleansing and the living water for internal transformation.

In Johannine 2:6, the six stone water jars appear as a prop that symbolises the Jewish rites of purification. Jesus uses the

11. See <https://catholic-resources.org/John/Vocab-Water.html>.



incomplete<sup>12</sup> and at the same time abandoned Jewish system intended for external purification in order to bring back the lost joy in the wedding place in Cana (Kanagaraj 2005:97–105). In the temple at Jerusalem, Jesus makes a whip of cords and chases all the business men from the temple premises (Blomberg 2001:87–90). He drives out the cattle, sheep and doves out of the temple precincts. His zeal for the father's house enabled him to get involved in the activity of cleansing the surroundings of the sanctuary (Jn 2:13–22; Thomaskutty 2015:93–106). Jesus encourages Nicodemus to be borne by water and be transformed (Jn 3:1–10; Bennema 2009:77–85) and instructs the Samaritan woman to drink the eternal water to be cleansed and satisfied (Jn 4:1–26; Thomaskutty 2020:145–151). The human born blind underwent a process of purification in the pool of Siloam (Jn 9:1–7; Moloney [1989] 1998:290–301). By washing the feet of the disciples, Jesus demonstrates the mission of sanctification coupled with service (Jn 13:1–20; Moloney [1989] 1998:370–381).

The cleansing and comforting power of the *Paraklētōs* is at the foreground of Jesus' Farewell Discourses (ch. 14–16). While the world's exclusive focus is on the external cleansing, the *Paraklētōs* as the Abiding Spirit cleanses the believing community internally and brings them closer to God (Jn 14:17; see Kanagaraj 2005:476–477). As a teacher, the *Paraklētōs* testifies the heavenly truth to the believers and purifies their hearts (Jn 14:25–26; 15:26–27; Blomberg 2001:210–211; Thomaskutty 2020:105–106). The advocate will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgement. Being cleansed by the Holy Spirit is a requirement for a believer to receive abundant joy (Jn 16:7–15; Thomaskutty 2020:106–107). Jesus prays, 'Sanctify them [the disciples] in the truth; your word is truth' (Jn 17:17). Through the words of Jesus and the works of the Holy Spirit, people can be cleansed and be saved (Blomberg 2001:223). With that force in mind, Jesus commands the disciples to 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (Jn 20:22; Moloney [1989] 1998:533). Believers are supposed to undergo continuous processes of cleansing to prove their material and spiritual sustenance as people of God. This aspect of the Johannine message is significant to consider during this COVID-19 pandemic situation.

## John's Gospel as a 'life camp' narrative

During the COVID-19 period, a large number of life or refugee camps are facilitated in different parts of the world in order to cherish life. While the life of people is at risk, these camps function as centres of hope and rejuvenation. The Johannine community was at risk of life as the mainstream society attempted to eliminate the group; but the narrator of the story comforts the community with the message of abundant life. Jesus appears in the gospel as the source of life.<sup>13</sup> In John, life or eternal life is not limited to a future age, but it is accessible 'here and now' for those who believe in Jesus (Jn 3:15–18, 36; 5:24; see Johnson 1992:469). The metaphor of water is used in

relation to the experience of eternal life (Jn 4:14).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the metaphors like reaping and harvest do not appear in a literal sense, but rather with a spiritual and eschatological sense (Jn 4:36; Johnson 1992:470–471). The Jews understand that through diligent study of the scripture, one can receive eternal life (Jn 5:39; 6:63; see Moloney [1989] 1998:180–181); but their ignorance is obvious as they do not understand that all the scriptures point to Jesus (Jn 20:31; Johnson 1992:470–471). The Johannine community was facilitated to develop a life-centred rhetoric, while they were counted as sinners, and as a consequence a diseased group of people. On the contrary, the Johannine community conceptualised themselves as 'sons of light' over against the 'sons of darkness'.

In Jesus's speech, he uses 'food' as a spiritual element that endures to eternal life (Jn 6:27). As he is the bread of life and provider of living water, whoever comes to him never be hungry and believes in him never be thirsty. The blessings of eternal life are assured to those who eat his flesh (Jn 6:35) and drink from his well (Jn 4:14; 7:37–39). This experience enables people to be raised up on the last day (Jn 6:40, 47; Beasley-Murray 1999:90–94). The metaphorical aspects such as 'eating the flesh' and 'drinking the blood' are also used in this regard (Jn 6:54–58). Some of the significant steps in experiencing eternal life include recognising that Jesus has the words of eternal life (Jn 6:68), and believing and knowing that he is the Holy One of God (Jn 6:69; Beasley-Murray 1999:90–94). Jesus came that the sheep may have life to the full (Jn 10:10). Abundant life refers to life in its abounding fullness of joy and strength for mind, body and soul. Reaching to such a destination is considered as the joy of salvation (Johnson 1992:469). In that sense, the Johannine community ethos emphasised the aspect of clinging on to Jesus. During this COVID-19 pandemic situation, a God-centred, Christ-focused and Word-oriented Christian life will enable people to sustain their life out of all sorts of dangers.

Jesus lays down his life for the sheep so that the sheep can experience life in abundance (Jn 10:15, 17, 28; 15:13). In 11:28, Jesus promises eternal life, and he assures that those who receive it will never perish (Jn 11:25, 26; 14:6; Moloney [1989] 1998:333). The divine standard is that 'the man who loves his life will lose it' and 'the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life' (Jn 12:25, 44–46, 50; 17:2).<sup>15</sup> In John's terms, 'Eternal life is that people may know the Father, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent' (Jn 17:3; Moloney [1989] 1998:461). Having abundant life is a unique privilege to exercise heavenly joy in its fullness. In sum, John explains the aspect of life in terms of believing and following Jesus, exercising divine love, enjoying the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, having fellowship with the people and thus enjoying the favours and blessings of God in abundance (Thomaskutty 2020:118–119). John's gospel teaches us that through an integral connectivity between the heavenly and the earthy, a transformative living is made possible. This life experience can challenge all sorts of

14. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 136–137.

15. Renn, 'Life, Live, Living', *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, 595; Moloney [1989] 1998:354).

12. The Jews perceived that the number 6 was a symbol of imperfection.

13. John 1:4; 5:21, 26, 40; 6:33.

illnesses, calamities and dangers. As the Johannine community functioned as a life camp where divine security and heavenly presence manifested, the contemporary situation persuades the people of God to get involve in the ministry of comforting the affected, saving the dying and rescuing the perishing souls.

## Implications and conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic situation persuades us to understand the interconnection between the Scripture and people's lived experiences for a transformed living in the world. In the process of reading, a fusion of the *ethos* of the Johannine community, the *logos* of the Johannine narrator and the *pathos* of the contemporary pandemic context is emerged as a 'third space' (see Soja 1996). As John's gospel orchestrates a literary artistry made out of the life struggles of both the Jesus movement and the Johannine community, a reader needs pang deep into the textures of the text to understand the semantic domains. This narrative feature of the text can be appreciated only through the means of intertwining both the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* and the *Sitz im Leben Kirche*. At the same time, the dual-stage development of the Johannine drama has the potential to accommodate the *Sitz im Leben COVID-19*. As the text exhibits its potential to absorb the universals, it demonstrates its poetic nature. A reader of the Fourth Gospel can realign her or his *pathos* within the textual framework for a transformative reading. As an accommodative literary masterpiece, this is what the rhetorical function of the Johannine text in the contemporary context. As the Jesus movement or the Johannine community identified with those who were in quarantine, experiencing social isolation, showing the power of healing in its or their day-to-day affairs, cleansed by the Word and the Holy Spirit, and emphasised security of life, the contemporary church can take new challenges from the text to get involved in the *Missio Dei*. In this process of reading, 'hope', 'comfort', 'security of life' and 'care' are the hermeneutical axioms to be emphasised. As the situation demands us to read the text in a new light, the text provides us a paradigm to shape our spirituality.

In recapitulation, the Jesus movement and the Johannine community teach us the following lessons in managing the crisis situation: (1) belief in the Creator God or Pre-existent *Logos* should be facilitated irrespective of all sorts of challenging situations; (2) the church should involve as a community to comfort and heal people who are in quarantine; (3) the people of God should get involved in the transforming mission to rescue the secluded and to feed the hungry; (4) the church should remain as a community of healing both in the physical and in the emotional or psychological areas of human life; (5) the community of God should teach the afflicted to trust in God even in the midst of deficiencies and promote charity and protection of life; (6) the believing community should remain as an agent of sanctification both in the physical and in the spiritual levels of human life; and (7) the members of the body of Christ should reiterate the voice of

God in the world to protect human life and to spread the good news of abundant life in Christ. A re-alignment of the *Sitz im Leben COVID-19* within the framework of the *Sitz im Leben Jesu* or *Sitz im Leben Kirche* would guide us during these difficult times.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

### Author's contribution

J.T. is the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

This article follows all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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