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Compositional Centre as the Interpretative Key in Biblical Exegesis of the Johannine Literature

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how finding the compositional centre of a text can be crucial for the correct understanding of its message. I will try to demonstrate this, using examples taken from the Johannine literature, in particular from the Gospel of John as well as from the First Letter of John. These examples will not only concern different texts but will represent different levels of the textual composition. It means that the examples will not be limited to small pieces of biblical text, such as a pericope or a passage, but will contain also larger textual units: a sub-sequence, a section and finally a book. In each case we shall see how the centre of a textual unit becomes decisive for the correct understanding of the global message of the text.

Prologue of John (Jn 1:1-18)

We begin with the smallest but independent textual unit which is called – using the technical language of Biblical Rhetorical Analysis – a “passage”. It can be of different lengths; sometimes it contains only one or two verses, sometimes it contains even more than ten verses. Our first example contains eighteen verses, and is very well known: it is the famous Prologue of the Gospel of John. In this case the delimitation of the text is not a problem. All scholars agree that the Prologue ends with verse 18.

The composition of the Prologue (see the next page) has been worked out according to the principles of Biblical Rhetorical Analysis, and first presented by Roland Meynet in his article “Analyse rhétorique du Prologue de Jean”¹, as early as in 1989, and then revised in 2010 in *Studia Rhetorica*². In this article you can find a brief summary of various proposals for the composition of the text, as well as a very detailed exposition of the proposal of the author, which includes different levels of the textual structure.

There is no place to discuss, or even mention, numerous problems related to the translation of the text, such as textual, grammatical, syntactical as well as lexical questions. However, it is necessary to note that the translation tries to be literal in order to maintain when possible the corresponding English equivalents of the Greek words of the original text. Such literal translation enables us to notice all the relevant “intratextual”³ connections inside the Prologue, fundamental for its interpretation. It is particularly important in the case of the verb “to occur” which translates always the

¹ R. MEYNET, “Analyse rhétorique du Prologue de Jean”, *Revue Biblique* 96 (1989) 481-510.

² See http://www.retoricabiblicaesemitica.org/Studia_Rhetorica_en.php

³ R. MEYNET, *Treatise on Biblical Rhetoric*, International Studies in the History of Rhetoric 3, Boston 2012, 235ff.

Greek verb γίνομαι (even if the translation sounds terrible!), since this verb returns nine times in the Prologue, in different strategic places, to express the “genesis” of various things, namely how they come to exist or how they appear. Thus the verb γίνομαι indicates a particular movement in the text, the movement related to the “genesis” of things, and it is connected to the other Greek verb γεννάω, translated here as “to beget” (13).

<p>¹ In the beginning was THE WORD, and THE WORD was with God; and THE WORD was God.</p> <p>² He was in the beginning with God.</p> <p>³ All things through him OCCURRED, and without him OCCURRED not even one thing.</p> <p>What HAS OCCURRED ⁴ in him was life and the life was the <i>light of men</i>,</p> <p>⁵ and the light in the darkness shines and the darkness <i>did not grasp it</i>.</p>
<p>⁶ There OCCURRED a man, sent from God, whose name was JOHN.</p> <p>⁷ He came for TESTIMONY, to TESTIFY about the light, that all might BELIEVE through him. ⁸ He was not the light, but came to TESTIFY about the light.</p>
<p>⁹ There was the TRUE light that enlightens every man that came into the world.</p> <p>¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world through him OCCURRED;</p> <p>and the world did not know him. ¹¹ To his own he came, and his own <i>did not receive him</i>.</p>
<p>¹² But as many as did receive him, to them he gave power to OCCUR CHILDREN OF God,</p> <p>to whose BELIEVING in his name,</p> <p>¹³ who not of blood nor of a will of flesh, nor of a will of man but from God WERE BEGOTTEN.</p>
<p>¹⁴ And THE WORD OCCURRED flesh and dwelt among us; and <i>we beheld his glory</i>, glory as of the one ONLY-BEGOTTEN of the Father, full <i>of grace and TRUTH</i>.</p>
<p>¹⁵ JOHN TESTIFIES and cries, saying: “He is the one of whom I said: ‘He who comes after me OCCURRED ahead of me, for he was before me’”.</p>
<p>¹⁶ For from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.</p> <p>¹⁷ For the Law was given through Moses, <i>grace and TRUTH</i> from JESUS CHRIST OCCURRED.</p> <p>¹⁸ <i>No one has ever seen God</i>; the ONLY-BEGOTTEN God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.</p>

The Prologue consists of three parts arranged in a concentric pattern (ABA’). The first part is parallel to the third part, mainly because of a “strange” repetition of the testimony of John the Baptist, in the verses 6-8 and 15, which respectively constitute the centre of each of the extreme parts (we can see it thanks of the recurrences of the vocabulary, marked in the table). The repetition was called “strange”, for in the opinion of many scholars – especially those practising the historical-critical exegesis – verse 15 becomes an unnecessary repetition which is quite out of context⁴, and

⁴ For R. Schnackenburg (*Il Vangelo di Giovanni*, I, Brescia 1973, 315) already the first mention of the testimony of John the Baptist is an interpolation of the evangelist due to an apologetic reason (*ibid*, 316), whereas verse 15 is out of context (*ibid*. 346).

together with the verses 6-8 constitutes a later addition to a hypothetical Christian hymn⁵. However, these verses have an important rhetorical function of focusing the message of the Prologue on the central part of the passage.

The first mention of the testimony of John, placed in the centre of the first part, presents its origin and its purpose: John was sent from God (6), so his testimony is reliable and powerful, and it is aimed at faith (7). The second mention of the testimony of John, placed in the centre of the second part, is different: it is no longer a narration but it is a direct quotation of what he “cries” (verb κράζω, in 15). So his testimony is not timid or secret, and everyone can hear it.

It is worthy of mention that the way in which the evangelist presents John the Baptist in the Prologue harmonizes perfectly with his presentation in the rest of the Fourth Gospel, as we can easily notice reading its first three chapters. In this gospel, unlike the synoptic gospels, John the Baptist is not a precursor, a forerunner of Christ, but he is a witness of the eternal Word of God! So, his figure and his role are very important in the Fourth Gospel, as much as the topic of testimony is important. The composition of the text reflects this importance: the testimony of John is not marginal or unnecessary, because it is placed at the *centre* of the extreme parts.

On the other hand the importance of John’s testimony is relative, as is indicated by the composition of the whole passage. The Prologue focuses on another question. In the very core of the Prologue there is a singular Johannine expression “children of God” (τέκνα θεοῦ, 12), which occurs six times in the Johannine writings: four times in the First Letter of John and just twice in the Gospel⁶. This expression corresponds to the synonymous one: they “from God were begotten” (ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν, 13); indeed both expressions are related to the same topic of sonship.

Thus, the very centre of the Prologue deals not with the “genesis” of the eternal Word of God incarnated in Jesus Christ, as we could expect, but with the sonship of those who believe in “his name” (12). What is “his name”? It could seem obvious that the name is “Jesus Christ”, since it is specified in the third part (17). It seems more plausible, however, that the evangelist intends to allude to the name “Son of God”, because in the third part he mentions twice the term “only-begotten” (μονογενής, 14.17), which is related to the term “Father” (πατήρ, 14.17), since it derives from the same semantic field. So, only those who accept the divine Sonship of Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, are capable to accept the power to become “children of God”, namely to accept the power of their own divine sonship.

It is surprising that the strategic points of the Prologue, which is known for its “high” theology, focus attention of the reader not on God but on man! Indeed, in the centre of the extreme parts there is a *man* – John, the witness of the Incarnate Word – and in the centre of the whole passage there is the divine sonship of the *men* who believe in Jesus. Moreover, we can notice that the core of the Prologue is a place of intersection of two thematic lines, or two movements: the line of the Incarnation of

⁵ See R.E. BROWN, *Giovanni*, Assisi 1997, 31-32.

⁶ The expression is used three times without the article (Jn 1:12; 1Jn 3:1.2) and three times with the article (Jn 11:52; 1Jn 3:10; 5:2).

the Son of God, who becomes man, and the line of divinisation of men who become children of God. The first line is impossible without the second. We can speak of the intersection of the two lines, because whereas the first line is only vertical, the second line is also horizontal. Indeed, the common divine sonship of men implies that they are mutually united in the relationship of brotherhood.

Concluding the first example: the main message of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel cannot be understood correctly without considering seriously the importance of the centre of its composition, which declares the divine sonship of all men who believe in Christ, since this is a pivotal place where Christology meets soteriology.

Interrogation of Jesus and Peter's denials (Jn 18:15-28)

The second example contains a larger textual unit, Jn 18:15-28, which forms the last sub-sequence of the first sequence of the Passion of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, the sequence dedicated to the arrest of Jesus. There are three sequences in the Passion narrative in John: Arrest (18:1-28), Trial (18:29–19:16) and Execution (19:17-42)⁷. This last sub-sequence of the Arrest, which contains two different narratives, is very particular because, unlike the synoptic gospels, it interlaces the interrogation of Jesus by the high priest Annas with three denials of Peter. Indeed, only John mixes the both scenes together in order to create the effect of simultaneity: at the same time as Jesus is questioned by the high priest about his teaching and his disciples, Peter is questioned by the servants of the high priest and three times (it means definitively) he denies his Master! It is an excellent example of the Johannine irony.

The composition of the text (see the next page) shows that this arrangement of the two interrogations is not casual, and that it should be interpreted in an ironic way. The table shows that in the centre of the whole sub-sequence there is a question of Jesus, "Why do you ask me?", followed by the unique imperative: "Ask those who have heard what I said to them". This claim of Jesus to witness to him is directed first of all to his disciples who heard him teaching, however Peter, the chief disciple, just in this very moment denies him! Moreover, it is only in the Fourth Gospel that Peter denies Jesus with a very short answer: "I am not" (οὐκ εἰμί, in Greek), different from the Synoptics. Only in John his two direct "I am not"⁸ are perfectly parallel, as you can see from the table. Biblical scholars notice the play of words with the similar, and compositionally symmetric, answers of Jesus "I am" (ἐγώ εἰμι, in Greek), placed in the scene of his arrest (Jn 18:4-9 – the text not presented here). When Jesus says "I am" he alludes to the Holy Name Yahweh ("I am who I am" in Ex 3:14), so as to indicate his true identity, his divine identity. Thus, when Peter says "I am not", he denies not only his Master and his God, but he denies himself, denies something profound of his own identity.

⁷ For the rhetorical composition of the entire Passion narrative in John, see J. ONISZCZYK, *La Passione del Signore secondo Giovanni (Gv 18–19)*, Retorica biblica 15, Bologna 2011.

⁸ The third answer is not quoted by John but only mentioned: "Again Peter denied [...]" (27).

¹⁵ **SIMON PETER** and the other **DISCIPLE** followed **JESUS**. Now that **DISCIPLE** was known to the **HIGH PRIEST**, and he **ENTERED** with **JESUS** to the hall of the **HIGH PRIEST**.

¹⁶ But **PETER** **STOOD** at the door outside. Therefore the other **DISCIPLE**, who was known to the **HIGH PRIEST**, went out and spoke to the gatekeeper and **brought PETER** in.

¹⁷ Then the maid, the gatekeeper, said to **PETER**: **“Are not you also one of this man’s DISCIPLES?”**.
He said: **“I AM NOT”**.

¹⁸ Now the **SERVANTS** and the **GUARDS** **WERE STANDING** around a charcoal fire that they had made, because it was cold, and were warming themselves.

Now PETER also **was** with them **STANDING** and **WARMING HIMSELF**.

¹⁹ The **HIGH PRIEST** then questioned **JESUS** about his **DISCIPLES** and about his teaching.

²⁰ **JESUS** answered him: “I have spoken openly to the world;
I have always taught in a **synagogue** and in the temple, where all Jews come together,
and in secret I have said nothing.

²¹ Why do you ask me? Ask **THOSE WHO HAVE HEARD** what I said to them.
They know what I said”.

²² When he had said this, one of the **GUARDS** **STANDING** there gave **JESUS** a slap, saying:
“Is this how you answer the **HIGH PRIEST**?”.

²³ **JESUS** answered him: “If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong;
but if rightly, why do you strike me?”.

²⁴ Annas then sent him bound *to Caiaphas*, the **HIGH PRIEST**.

²⁵ **Now SIMON PETER** **was** **STANDING** and **WARMING HIMSELF**.

They said to him: **“Are not you also one of his DISCIPLES?”**

He denied it and said: **“I AM NOT”**.

²⁶ One of the **SERVANTS** of the **HIGH PRIEST**, a kinsman of the one whose ear **PETER** had cut off, said:
“Did I not see you in the garden with him?” ²⁷ Again **PETER** denied it and at once the cock crowed.

²⁸ They **brought**, therefore, **JESUS** *from Caiaphas* to the praetorium. It was morning.
They themselves **DID NOT ENTER** the praetorium, in order not to be defiled, but to eat the Passover.

In conclusion: the message of this sub-sequence cannot be fully appreciated without noticing the crucial role of the central verse of the text, the imperative of Jesus, “Ask those who have heard what I said the them”. This claim ironically alludes to the anti-testimony of Peter but, on the other hand, rhetorically, it surpasses the historical limits of the text in order to invite the reader to give testimony to Jesus, instead of Peter.

Anticipation of Jesus’ death and its soteriological meaning (Jn 11–12)

The third example embraces the entire section of the Fourth Gospel which is formed of two chapters 11–12. It would be difficult to expose all the text of these chapters in a single table. So, I will present here only its composition as it is summarized in titles which denote the content of each of the sequences in their mutual relationship. The words reported in the quotation marks are taken literally from the text. They indicate the most important concepts and keywords of the text.

The first sequence (11:1-46) tells the story of the resurrection of Lazarus, the second (11:47-57) is dedicated to a gathering of the Sanhedrin when the death of Jesus is decided. The third sequence, covering the whole chapter 12, is less uniform,

since it includes apparently different narratives such as: the anointing at Bethany and the triumphal entry of Jesus in Jerusalem, a meeting with the Jews and the Greeks when Jesus foretells his death and glorification, and finally a recapitulation of the ministry of Jesus: first done by the evangelist who summarizes the biblical motives of the unbelief of the Jews, and then in the words of Jesus himself who confirms the vital and divine character of his mission.

<p>“THE SON OF GOD” – a “sign” which</p>	<p><i>restores life to Lazarus</i> <i>divides</i> the Jews</p>	11:1-46
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<p>The Sanhedrin decides to but his death</p>	<p><i>put Jesus to death</i> <i>will unite</i> “THE CHILDREN OF GOD”</p>	11:47-57
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<p>“THE SON OF MAN” – “glorified”, he</p>	<p><i>predicts his death</i> “<i>will attract</i>” all men to him</p>	12:1-50
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As can be seen from the plan, the three sequences are united by the common topic of death and resurrection, first of Lazarus and then of Jesus, as well as by the similar dualistic question of division or unity of the people who react to Jesus’ ministry.

The extreme sequences are parallel thanks of two Christological titles, “the Son of God” and “the Son of man”, applied to Jesus, which appear in strategic points of the text. It can be seen from the next plan, more detailed, where the internal structure of the extreme sequences is also presented.

<p>Jesus <i>LETS LAZARUS DIE</i>, so that “THE GLORY OF GOD” may be revealed</p>	11:1-19
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<p>Jesus meets <i>LAZARUS</i>’ sisters – Martha</p>	<p>“BELIEVES” He is “THE SON OF GOD”</p>	11:20-32
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<p>Jesus <i>RESTORE LIFE TO LAZARUS</i>, to reveal “THE GLORY OF GOD” but <i>not all</i> “BELIEVE” in Him</p>	11:33-46
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<p>The “high priests” and the “PHARISEES” decide to <i>BRING JESUS TO DEATH</i> – the prophecy that Jesus will unite “THE CHILDREN OF GOD”</p>	11:47-57
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<p>The people honor Jesus and proclaim him “the king of Israel”, but the “PHARISEES” <i>do not BELIEVE</i> in Him</p>	12:1-19
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<p>Jesus announces the “hour” when He, being “GLORIFIED” by</p>	<p>“THE SON OF MAN”, will be <i>HIS “DEATH”</i></p>	12:20-36a
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<p>Isaiah has seen “THE GLORY” of Jesus but the “PHARISEES” <i>remain blind and dumb</i></p>	12:36b-50
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The titles harmonize very well with the content of the sequences they represent. So, in the first sequence the miracle of restoring life to Lazarus reveals clearly the power of “the Son of God”, whereas in the last sequence the discourse with the Jews and the Greeks, when Jesus alludes to his imminent death and glorification, shows him as “the Son of man” – a well known title deriving from the OT (see Dn 7:13-14).

The Christological titles of Jesus, placed in the extreme sequences, are related to the expression “the children of God” (τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ, in 11:52), placed in the central sequence. We have already seen the same expression in the centre of the Prologue. In this expression the evangelist summarizes the soteriological and universal purpose of the death of Jesus, interpreting as a prophecy the words of Caiaphas: “He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he *prophesied* that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one *the children of God* who are scattered abroad” (11:51-52).

Coming back to the first plan, we can see that the section contains a passage from the “signs” (σημεῖα; 11:47; 12:18.37) to the “glory” (δόξα; 11:4.40, 12:16.23.28.41.43). These two notions are commonly considered the most relevant for the structure of the entire Gospel. Indeed, the resurrection of Lazarus is the last “sign” in John, because after that the “hour” of Jesus’ “glorification” begins (12:23). In this way, the gathering of the Sanhedrin is a turning point of the narrative and at the same time a pivot of the textual composition.

Concluding the third example: the importance of the central unit of this section, namely the gathering of the Sanhedrin and the decision to put Jesus to death, cannot be overestimated, especially since it articulates the soteriological motive of the death of Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel the term “children of God” appears only twice: in the very centre of the Prologue, commonly considered a synthesis of the entire Gospel, and in the very centre of this section. Moreover, there are good reasons to believe that this section is the centre of the entire Gospel of John⁹. In order to verify this hypothesis, the rhetorical analysis of the whole Gospel ought to be completed.

Now I shall proceed to the last example which presents the composition of an entire book, namely of the First Letter of John, as well as the crucial importance of its central passage.

The First Letter of John

The composition of the Letter, summarized in titles, has been elaborated according to the principles of Biblical Rhetorical Analysis¹⁰. There are three main sections: the first (A) and the last (C) respectively form an introduction and a conclusion; the second

⁹ See the doctoral dissertation of G. MLAKUZYIL, *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel*, Analecta biblica, Roma 1987, as well as the following debate in reaction to it, e.g. in: Ch.H. GIBLIN, “The Tripartite Narrative Structure in John’s Gospel”, *Biblica* 71 (1990) 449-468; G. ØESTENSTAD, “The Structure of the Fourth Gospel: Can it be Defined Objectively?”, *Studia theologica* 45 (1991) 33-55; L. SÁNCHEZ NAVARRO, “Estructura testimonial del Evangelio de Juan”, *Biblica* 86/4 (2005) 511-528.

¹⁰ See J. ONISZCZYK, *La Prima Lettera di Giovanni. La giustizia dei figli*, Retorica Biblica 11, Roma 2009.

section (B), which includes the body of the Letter, is divided into five concentric sequences (B1 to B5). The introduction insists on the certitude of the testimony to the “Word of life” and promises full communion with God. The conclusion insists on the certitude of the gift of eternal life, through Jesus, and shows how this communion with God is already being realized in the case of the members of the Johannine community who truly believe in the Son of God. The body of the Letter specifies necessary conditions for accomplishing this passage from the promise and the fulfilment.

Certitude of the testimony		to the WORD OF LIFE	A (1:1-10)
Conduct of the sons	according to the justice of	Jesus Christ	B1 (2:1-17)
Acknowledge	the identity of Jesus the Christ	and that of ones own	B2 (2:18–3,1)
BELIEVE in Jesus	and LOVE brothers	to have the ETERNAL LIFE	B3 (3:2-24)
Acknowledge	the origin of Jesus, the Son	and that of ones own	B4 (4:1-10)
Faith of the sons	in the Son of God,	Jesus Christ	B5 (4:11–5,12)
Certitude of the gift of		ETERNAL LIFE in the SON OF GOD	C (5:13-21)

These conditions can be summarized in the concept of biblical justice of the “children of God” (τέκνα θεοῦ, in 3:1.2 and τὰ τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ in 3:10; 5:2), which embraces two others fundamental topics of the Letter: the commandment to *believe* in the name of Jesus Christ and to *love* the brothers (3:23), as He did, in order to have the eternal life in Him. As you can see from the plan, these fundamental concepts appear especially in the central sequence of the Letter (B3). This central sequence is formed of three concentric passages, as outlined in the following plan.

BE SIMILAR <i>A hope</i>	TO THE SON OF GOD that leads to the purification from sin	3:2-10
LOVE <i>A love</i>	BROTHERS that makes to pass over from death to life	3:11-17
BELIEVE <i>A confidence</i>	IN THE SON OF GOD that comes from keeping the commandments	3:18-24

Now, it is interesting to note that the central passage of the sequence (11-17) is very particular, since it contains the unique biblical figure mentioned in the Letter, that of Cain (12), as well as the unique occurrence of the vocative “brothers” (13). Actually, there are different vocatives, forming a very regular pattern of repetitions

throughout the body of the Letter, but the vocative “brothers” appears only once and only here, in its very centre¹¹. However, let us focus on the central passage.

+ Deed of Cain who <i>slaughtered</i> his brother	11-12
Brotherly love that marks the passage <i>from death to life</i>	13-15
+ Deed of Christ who <i>laid down his life</i> for the brothers	16-17

It is formed of three perfectly concentric parts, with the vocative “brothers” placed in the middle. The extreme parts oppose the figure of Cain to that of Christ: the former slaughtered his brother, whereas the latter laid down his life for the brothers. The opposition aims to illustrate a truly vital necessity of brotherly and Christian love in the Johannine community, as is clearly indicated in the central part (13-15).

It may be useful to see all the text of the passage, as it is composed in three parts.

¹¹ For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning,
that we should **LOVE** one another.

¹² Not as **CAIN**, who was from the evil and **SLAUGHTERED HIS BROTHER**.
And why did he **SLAUGHTER** him?
Because his own deeds were evil and his **BROTHER'S** righteous.

¹³ Do not wonder, **BROTHERS**, if the world **hates** you.

¹⁴ We know that we have passed over from death to life, because we **LOVE THE BROTHERS**.

He who does not **LOVE**, remains in death.

¹⁵ Anyone who **hates HIS BROTHER** is a murderer;
and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him.

¹⁶ In this we have known **LOVE** that **HE LAID DOWN HIS LIFE** for us,
and we ought to **LAY DOWN OUR LIVES** for **THE BROTHERS**.

¹⁷ If anyone has the world's goods and sees **HIS BROTHER** in need
but closes his heart to him,
how can the **LOVE** of God be remaining in him?

It seems important to notice that the very core of the Letter insists mainly on the humanity of Christ, unlike the Fourth Gospel which insists on His divinity. Indeed,

¹¹ See J. ONISZCZYK, “Funzione dei vocativi nella Prima Lettera di Giovanni e altri due libri”, *Studia Rhetorica* 27e (19.10.2007), http://www.retoricabiblicaesemitica.org/Pubblicazioni/Studia_Rhetorica/27e.pdf; and ID., “Caino come tipo antitetico di Cristo nella Prima Lettera di Giovanni”, *Gregorianum* 95/3 (2014) 453-468.

Christ is presented here as our brother, since He is opposed to Cain, the most famous brother in the Bible.

In conclusion: the composition of the First Letter of John clearly indicates that the true brotherhood, modelled on Christ, is the principal question not only of this passage but also of the whole Letter. It can be confirmed by the common opinion of scholars that the *Sitz im Leben* of the Johannine community is marked by internal divisions among its members which led to a schism (see 1Jn 2:18-19; 2:22; 4:1-3)¹². Once again, the central unit of the text becomes crucial in searching for its main message.

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¹² A perspicacious outline of the history of the Johannine community can be found in R.E. BROWN, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, New York 1997.