

Collective Voice in the Gospels

Chrysanthos S. Chrysanthou, Byron Waldron

Abstract: *This article offers the first sustained analysis of collective voice and collective cognition in the canonical Gospels by integrating narrative criticism with contemporary social-cognitive theory. It argues that groups function not merely as narrative characters or sociological aggregates but as collective cognitive subjects whose shared speech, evaluations, emotions, and misunderstandings shape narrative meaning. The study examines how plural speakers act as questioners, evaluators, and knowers, considers intra-group deliberation, disagreement and division, and evaluates the extent of collective agency within the Gospel narratives. It reframes discussions of groups in Gospel narratology and contributes to broader debates in classics concerning the narrative representation of collective minds, offering a methodological framework for analysing collective speech and cognition in ancient literature and highlighting the communal dimensions of revelation, belief, discipleship, and the shared experience of faith that would later become central to Christian ecclesial life.*

Keywords: *Gospels, Collective Speech, Collective Characters, Narrative, Misunderstanding, Greek Literature*

Studies of ancient Greek and Roman narrative have long recognized the centrality of speech, focalization, and characterization as organizing principles of storytelling. Yet within this otherwise rich narratological landscape, collective or first-person plural speech and narration—what contemporary theory terms ‘we-narration’ or ‘we-voice’—has received remarkably little systematic attention. The scarcity of scholarship is striking given that Greek and Roman antiquity abounded in sites of collective experience and social interaction, including civic assemblies, military units, choral performance, communal ritual, and collective deci-

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sion-making.¹ One might therefore expect ancient narratives to reflect these lived group dynamics. Instead, collective speakers have remained marginal in narratological histories of ancient literature, often dismissed as too sporadic, too fragmentary, or too unstable to merit sustained analysis.²

Yet the phenomenon is more substantial than such neglect implies. Even if ancient authors rarely chose communities—whether soldiers, local populations, families, or civic bodies—as continuous narrators in the manner of some modern fiction (e.g., William Faulkner’s 1930 tale *A Rose for Emily*),³ plural speakers who think, speak, and react jointly do occur here and there across ancient Greek and Latin narrative.⁴ These groups emerge as distinct plural

¹ See Gill, *Personality*; Gill, *Structured Self*; Farenga, *Citizen and Self*; Chaniotis, “Displaying Emotional Community”.

² See the references scattered across several contributions in de Bakker and de Jong, *Speech*, esp., 40–41 (Homer), 111–112 (Apollonius of Rhodes), 125 (Callimachus), 160–161 (Quintus of Smyrna), 317–318, 323–324 (Cassius Dio); 597 (Philostratus’ *VA*).

³ Diplomatic letters or decrees may form an exception (Chaniotis, “Emotional Community through Ritual”; Chaniotis, “Affective Diplomacy”). Civic inscriptions beginning with the formula ἔδοξεν τῇ βουλῇ καὶ τῷ δήμῳ (“the Council and the people decided”) offer another case of collective self-representation (Rhodes, *Athenian Boule*, 49–87), though this is not we-speech in the sense discussed here. The scarcity of fully first-person-plural ancient narratives may stem from the increasingly individualistic nature of authorship in the Greco-Roman world (Beecroft, *Authorship*; Netz, *Scale, Space and Canon*), an insight we owe to Tim Whitmarsh. Yet Hafner, *Funktion, Stimme, Fiktion*, has shown that authorship in the Archaic and Classical periods can be understood as cooperative, which aligns with the prominence of we-voices in several genres of the time (e.g., choral lyric, drama).

⁴ Ancient literary critics have referred to the phenomenon of ascribing speech to collectives like people or cities as *fictio personae* or προσωποποιία (Lausberg, *Literary Rhetoric*, §828). The most prominent example is the chorus in Greek drama and archaic lyric poetry (Kaimio, *The Chorus*; Budelmann, “Group Minds”; Steiner, *Choral Constructions*). See also several Homeric ‘choral speeches’, also known as *tis-* or collective speeches (e.g., the Trojan elders in *Iliad* 3.156–60), with de Jong, “Voice of Anonymity”; collective speeches in Flavian epic, with Finkmann, “Collective Speech and Silence”; the Greek erotic novels (e.g., *Hld.* 1.19.2; 9.24.2; Longus 2.8.2–5; 2.9.1–2; *Xen. Eph.* 5.13.4); historiography (*Hdt.* 4.114, 5.18, 7.27.1–2, 8.140–4, with Chamberlain, “We the Others”; *Thuc.* 1.67–79, with Hornblower,

subjects, endowed with shared mental states, emotions, evaluative stances, and at times agential force. In such instances, the first-person plural is often used to mark a ‘group ethos’ and communal perspective that complicates, complements, and at moments even challenges the viewpoints of individual characters.⁵ The interplay between collective and individual perspectives thus becomes a narrativized theme in its own right.

This article examines this largely overlooked phenomenon through a focused case study of the four canonical Gospels. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John feature an unusually dense concentration of collective speakers who operate both at the level of the story and the discourse. While collective voices occur across Greek literature, few ancient narratives assign such a persistent and consequential role to group speech in shaping revelation, misunderstanding, characterization, and plot development. The Gospels therefore provide an especially rich corpus for exploring the narrative functions of collective speech and cognition. Although their interest in collective voice resonates with the Hebrew Bible, this study does not pursue questions of origin.⁶ Instead, it analyses how the Gos-

Thucydides, 108 ad loc); oratory (Dem. 4.25; 8.35–37; 21.204; 58.25–26; And. 1.63); and philosophy (the personified speaking laws in Pl. *Cri.* 50a–54d; the voice of the dead ‘fathers’ in Pl. *Menex.* 246d–248d). We return to this issue in the Conclusions, where we offer a comparative perspective on the presence and role of collective voice in the Gospels and other ancient Greek narratives.

⁵ On the association of ‘we’ and other first-person plural pronouns with the linguistic formation and reinforcement of social groups, and on how their use can carry significant political implications, see Morris, “First Persons Plural”; Woller, “First-Person Plural”; Helmbrecht, “Grammar and Function,” 41; Pavlidou, “Constructing Collectivity”. The notion of a ‘group ethos’ is the hallmark of Tuomela, *Philosophy of Sociality*, and Tuomela, *Social Ontology*. Lasagni, *Shared Agency*, 28 n. 16 elucidates the notion of group ethos as a ‘shared cognitive background’, which ‘contains all values, goals, reasons, and concepts that the members of the group have found the right contents to embrace’.

⁶ See, e.g., the people in Exod. (e.g., 32.1–2), and the Gibeonites (6–12; 24–25), Israelites (7) and Israelite leaders (19–21) in Josh. 9. In II Kings 2 the prophets at Bethel (3), the prophets at Jericho (5, 15–16), the people of Jericho (19) and the children of Bethel (23) speak as groups. See also Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 72; Savran, “Multivocality.” Olrik, “Epic Laws,” 134–135 argues that interaction in folkloristic early narrative tended to be a dialogue between

pels deploy collective voice as a narratological device for presenting Jesus' ministry, constructing characterization, and guiding readers' interpretation.

Our approach aligns with the long-standing practice of narrative criticism, which treats the Gospels as crafted storyworlds that convey meaning through literary strategies.⁷ Prior studies within this tradition have emphasized the role of groups as characters, especially the disciples or the crowds, and the pedagogical and rhetorical functions of their speech.⁸ Scholars such as Robert M. Fowler have shown how the evangelists use dialogue and plot dynamics to shape the reader's experience.⁹ Yet despite this attention to group characters, no study has systematically examined the Gospels' re-

two characters, in which case groups would speak as a whole to function as one of the two characters (Savran, "Multivocality," 2).

⁷ See, e.g., Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*; Culpepper, *Anatomy*; J. Brown, *Gospels as Stories*; and multiple contributions by Dinkler: "Silence as Rhetorical Technique" (silence in Luke 14.1–6); *Silent Statements* (speech and silence in Luke); "Thoughts of Many Hearts" (interior monologues in Luke); "Building Character" (characterization in Luke 24:13–35); "Reflexivity and Emotion" (emotions and narrative reflexivity in Luke and Acts); "Between Intention and Reception" (textual meaning and reader response theories); "Narrative Rhetoric" (speech and silence in Acts); "Re-forming Our Understandings" (narrative communication, narrative affordances and audience attention). These articles include useful bibliographical overviews.

⁸ See, e.g., Minear, "Audience Criticism"; Malbon, *Narrative Space*; Malbon, "Jewish Leaders"; Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend*; Darr, *Character Building*; Barton, *Discipleship*; Malbon, "Major Importance"; Williams, *Other Followers*; Ascough, "Narrative Technique"; Beck, *Discipleship Paradigm*; Cousland, *Crowds*; Hunt, Tolmie and Zimmermann, *Character Studies*; J. Brown, *Gospels as Stories*, 85–104. For the study of the Gospels as narrative, one can only cite a limited selection of examples. Mark: Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism"; Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark as Story*; de Campos, *Resisting Jesus*. Matthew: Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*. Luke: Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*; Lee, *Luke's Stories*; Dinkler, "Building Character." John: Culpepper, *Anatomy*; du Rand, "Characterization of Jesus"; Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*; Frey, *Theology and History*; Luther, "Authentication of the Past."

⁹ Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand*, 127–154, with 127–134 on character speech. For the application of reader-oriented criticism to the Gospels, see, e.g., Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark"; Resseguie, "Reader-Response Criticism"; Darr, *Character Building*; Beck, *Discipleship Paradigm*; the work of Dinkler cited earlier in n. 7.

peated use of direct collective discourse and plural cognitive acts as a distinct narratological phenomenon. Even the recent discussion of speech in the Gospels by Michal Beth Dinkler—valuable though it is for its analysis of direct and indirect discourse, reported speech acts, and the role of speech and silence in characterization¹⁰—does not address plural speakers as a distinct phenomenon. Dinkler does analyse group speech (alongside individual speech and silence), particularly that of religious leaders and disciples, as a tool of characterization in her 2013 book *Silent Statements*, but her focus remains on how speech and silence encode moral meaning, and how they operate rhetorically to shape the reader's dynamic perceptions of characters within Luke's plot.¹¹

Accordingly, our approach differs from much existing Gospel narratology in both scope and purpose. We treat collective speakers not merely as aggregates of individual characters but as plural cognitive agents endowed with shared mental states, collective intentions, and group-level evaluative perspectives. By foregrounding collective cognition, this article reframes familiar Gospel groups—not only disciples and crowds, but also opponents, bystanders, and supernatural collectives—as narrative subjects whose shared epistemic and evaluative orientations contribute to the construction of meaning. We examine how collective speech and cognition shape revelation and misunderstanding, structure plot and conflict, inform the characterization of both groups and individual figures, and guide readers' interpretation across all four Gospels rather than within a single narrative.

To analyse this feature, we draw upon contemporary research in social cognition and collective intentionality. According to Raimo Tuomela's influential account, human social interaction operates across three modes: the 'I-mode', the 'pro-group I-mode', and the fully collectivized 'we-mode', in which individuals think and

¹⁰ Dinkler, "The Gospels."

¹¹ There have also been several studies of we-passages in the sea-voyage narratives of Acts (Robbins, "By Land and By Sea"; Wedderburn, "'We'-Passages"; Campbell, *We' Passages*), but these adopt a broader definition of we-narration, treating instances where an individual speaks on behalf of a group rather than cases in which a collective speaks for itself.

act as group members and in the interests of the group.¹² Such we-mode reasoning is essential for understanding phenomena such as joint belief formation, shared emotional states, and coordinated action. These frameworks help clarify why we may legitimately speak of plural characters in narrative who ‘think’, ‘reason’, ‘feel’, or ‘perceive’ as groups, and why their collective perspectives are not reducible to those of individual members. At the same time, these concepts are employed here as heuristic and interpretive tools rather than as historical explanations. Developed to account for real-world social interaction, modern theories of collective cognition are not assumed to have been available to the evangelists themselves. Rather, they provide a conceptual vocabulary for describing narrative phenomena that might otherwise remain difficult to articulate, while priority remains with the textual representation itself.

In that regard, we also incorporate insights from narrative theory on we-narration, especially the work of Natalya Bekhta, who distinguishes between ‘indicative’ we-usage (an individual speaker aligning with or speaking on behalf of a group) and ‘performative’ we-usage (a genuine plural narrator or collective subject).¹³ We adopt Bekhta’s conceptual toolkit to describe the Gospels’ collective speakers: plural voices that are not reducible to any single individual but function as narratively constructed, cognitively unified agents. Accordingly, we use ‘collective voice’, ‘plural voice’, and ‘we-voice’ to refer only to such instances of group speech, thought, or action that operate at this collective level.

A methodological and conceptual clarification is necessary. Throughout this article, ‘collective voice’ and ‘collective cognition’ are treated as related but distinct concepts. Collective voice is a narratological category referring to the textual representation of a group speaking, evaluating, questioning, or otherwise expressing itself as a plural subject. Collective cognition, by contrast, is an analytical category describing the attribution of shared beliefs, intentions, emotions, interpretive frameworks, or epistemic orientations to a group. Although collective voice may provide evidence for collective cognition, the two should not be conflated. A group

¹² Tuomela, *Social Ontology*; Tuomela, “We-Thinking.”

¹³ Bekhta, *Collective Storytelling*.

may speak with a single voice without exhibiting complete cognitive uniformity, just as shared patterns of understanding, misunderstanding, or evaluation may exist without being articulated through explicit collective speech.

Accordingly, this study does not assume the existence of a stable, fully coherent, or psychologically unified collective mind behind every instance of collective speech. Rather, it examines the ways in which the evangelists narratively construct groups as collective subjects and represent varying degrees of cognitive alignment among their members. In some passages, groups speak and act with a remarkable degree of unity; in others, they deliberate, disagree, divide into factions, or exhibit competing interpretations. Collective cognition is therefore understood not as an all-or-nothing phenomenon but as a spectrum ranging from strong consensus to provisional, contested, and internally differentiated forms of shared understanding. The object of analysis is thus not an actual psychological entity, but a narrative representation of collective cognition as conveyed through collective speech, action, evaluation, and other forms of group representation.

The first section examines how groups appear as speaking subjects, especially through questioning, evaluating, and expressing knowledge or misunderstanding. The second explores internal group dynamics—deliberation, debate, and distributed cognition. The third evaluates the extent to which collective speakers exercise agency within the storyworld. The conclusion summarizes the results, suggesting that attention to collective voice and collective cognition enriches our understanding of the Gospels at multiple levels, including plot dynamics (how events unfold), narrative dynamics (how plural perspectives structure the representation of revelation and belief), and reader dynamics (how collective reactions guide interpretation and evaluation). More broadly, it argues that the Gospels portray faith, unbelief, discipleship, and revelation not merely as individual experiences but also as communal processes embedded within shared frameworks of understanding. In this regard, the present article offers a first step toward the development of a poetics of ancient collective speech and cognition, providing conceptual tools for analysing how ancient narratives construct, represent, and deploy plural voices, minds, and forms of agency, while illuminat-

ing the communal dimensions of religious experience that would later become central to Christian ecclesial life.

Finally, although we draw examples from all four Gospels, we do not treat them as a uniform corpus. Each Gospel uses plural voice differently. Our aim is not to catalogue every instance but to identify recurring narrative strategies that emerge across the four texts. Thus, the model developed here is not rigidly comparative, but a flexible, context-sensitive framework that highlights the narrative possibilities afforded by the collective voice and the interpretive effects it produces for ancient and modern readers alike.

1. Plural Speakers, Evaluators, And Knowers

Groups employ direct speech across all four Gospels, but the significance of this use of collective speech becomes clear only when we focus on instances where a group questions or evaluates as a unified subject—that is, where the narrative attributes shared perception, intention, or emotion to a plural ‘we’. When such groups use ἡμεῖς or first-person plural verb forms, they function not merely as crowds or aggregates but as collective cognizers, a phenomenon consistent with ancient practices of representing group speech in tragedy, historiography, and civic discourse.¹⁴

Among Jesus’ followers, the disciples, including the Twelve and smaller clusters, regularly speak in the first-person plural. So do groups of miracle recipients, such as the two blind men in Matthew 9.27–31; 20.29–34, and the ten lepers in Luke 17.13.¹⁵ These episodes highlight shared need or shared (mis)understanding, and present the group as possessing a joint perspective. Angelic collectives also speak with one voice, as in the praise of the heavenly host before the shepherds (Luke 2.13–14) or the two figures at Jesus’ tomb.¹⁶ In each case, the narrative deploys the plural voice to foreground communal knowledge or communal proclamation.

Opposing groups likewise appear as collective speakers: Phari-

¹⁴ See nn. 3–4 above.

¹⁵ For the translations of the Gospels throughout, we are using those of the *NOAB* (fifth edition, 2018), slightly adapted at some points.

¹⁶ Although Mark 16.1–8 and Matthew 28.1–8 have one angel, two angels appear in Luke 24.1–9 and John 20.11–13.

sees, Sadducees, scribes, chief priests, elders, and other coalitions challenge Jesus in the plural. The distinctive use of Ἰουδαῖοι in group-speech contexts in John typically refers not to the Jewish people collectively but to a bloc of Torah- and Temple-aligned authorities.¹⁷ Other adversarial collectives—including false witnesses, soldiers, and mockers at the crucifixion—also speak in coordinated plural voice, often expressing shared hostility or shared interpretive blindness. Even unclean spirits may speak collectively. In Mark 5.6–13, the demoniac alternates between singular and plural self-reference (‘My name is Legion, for we are many’, 5.9), dramatizing the possibility of composite agency within a single character.¹⁸ This passage is an extreme example of group-level intentionality manifested through a single speaking body. Crowds (ὄχλοι) are the most flexible plural speakers: depending on context, they function as followers, antagonists, or uncertain observers.¹⁹ Bystanders in the Synoptic Gospels share this elasticity.

In nearly all such cases, the narrative marks collective voice through plural pronouns and verbs, and introduces their speech with the plural forms εἶπον, λέγουσι(ν), or ἐπηρώτων. A striking exception is Matthew 21.10–11, where ‘the whole city’ (πᾶσα ἡ πόλις), grammatically singular, ‘was saying’ (λέγουσα), ‘Who is this?’, before being answered by the accompanying crowds. Here, a civic entity functions as a singular speaking subject, a technique familiar from Greek tragedy (the chorus’ voice often alternates between first-person plural and first-person singular) and historiography,²⁰ and one that underscores the narrative flexibility with which the

¹⁷ On the ‘Jews’ in John, see von Wahlde, “Johannine Jews”; von Wahlde, “The ‘Jews’”; Bieringer, Pollefeyt and Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, *Anti-Judaism*, 229–356; Kierspel, *The Jews and the World*, 13–62; Bennema, “Identity and Composition”; Zimmermann, “‘The Jews’”; Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 87–100.

¹⁸ Luke 8.28–33 relates the same episode but in the direct speech only uses I-language (Bovon, *Lukas 1*, 435).

¹⁹ On crowds as characters in the Gospels, see Ascough, “Narrative Technique”; Cousland, *Crowds*; Koester, *Symbolism*, 54–62; Bennema, “The Crowd.”

²⁰ See Kaimio, *The Chorus*; Budelmann, “Group Minds”; Chrysanthou, “Group Minds in Ancient Narrative.”

Gospels construct collective perspective.

(a) *Questions and Answers*

The most common speech act of collective characters is the question, and the Gospels use group questioning to frame key moments of revelation, conflict, and teaching. Demons' questions in the Synoptics serve to reveal Jesus' supernatural authority: 'What have you to do with us, Son of God?' (Matthew 8.29). Their collective recognition of Jesus contrasts with accusations from human opponents that he exorcizes demons through the power of Beelzebul (Matthew 12.24), and invites the reader to consider Jesus' identity from a supernatural vantage point.²¹ Likewise, witnesses to exorcisms ask, 'What kind of utterance is this?' (Luke 4.36), prompting reflection on Jesus' authority.

Collective questions can express scepticism while still pointing the reader toward Christological insight. When the scribes ask, 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?' (Mark 2.7), their objection inadvertently clarifies that Jesus speaks with divine prerogative.²² Similarly, in John 7.15, the Jews wonder how Jesus teaches without formal training, thereby enabling Jesus—and the narrative—to assert divine authorization. Extended interrogations, such as those surrounding the healing of the man born blind (John 9.8–34), juxtapose Jesus' revelatory power with the persistent confusion of opposing groups. Their repeated questioning, inability to accept testimony, and eventual recourse to expulsion highlight collective resistance and interpretive failure.

The disciples' questions often initiate miracles or teaching. Their remarks in Mark 6.35–38 ('Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?', 6.38) create the narrative problem that Jesus resolves through the feeding miracle.²³

²¹ Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 188; Collins, *Mark*, 169–170. In Mark 1.24 and Luke 4.34, singular demons ask this question using the indicative 'we' on behalf of all demons (Fitzmyer, *Luke (I–IX)*, 545–546).

²² Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 222–223.

²³ See also Matthew 14.15–17 and Luke 9.12–13, as well as the second feeding miracle (Mark 8.4–5; Matthew 15.33–34). Matthew and Luke are more careful to present the disciples in a positive light, and so the disciples

Elsewhere, collective inquiry becomes a vehicle for clarification. For example, after the disciples fail to exorcize a demon, they ask Jesus, 'Why could we not cast it out?' (Mark 9.28). When Jesus provides the metaphor of a camel going through the eye of a needle, the astounded disciples say to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' (Mark 10.26; Matthew 19.25; see also Luke 18.26, where bystanders say this). Such questions expose the disciples' limits while providing occasions for Jesus to articulate theological principles about faith, prayer, and salvation.

Oppositional groups, by contrast, frequently use questions to test Jesus.²⁴ For instance, the Pharisees challenge Jesus for curing people on the sabbath (Matthew 12.10),²⁵ and for allowing his disciples to pluck heads of grain, likewise on the sabbath (Mark 2.24; Matthew 12.2; Luke 6.2),²⁶ and the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus what to do with a woman who has committed adultery (John 8.3–6). Their questions are less genuine inquiries than strategic speech acts, reflecting coordinated attempts to discredit Jesus, although their eventual effect is to provide Jesus with opportunities to argue against overly strict interpretations of religious law. Mark 12.13–34 provides a concentrated sequence of these pluralised confrontations. First, the chief priests, scribes and elders send to Jesus some Pharisees and Herodians, who seek to trap him with the following words: 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?' (12.14–15). But Jesus knows they are insincere, and his answer,

speaks about the issue without the hint of sarcasm (Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, Vol. 2, 489; see Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 418 on the disciples' sarcasm in Mark). John 6.5–9 instead has Jesus draw attention to the problem of feeding the crowd to test his disciples.

²⁴ Dinkler, *Silent Statements*, 91 notes that 'with the obvious exception of the crucifixion itself, the hostility between Jesus and the authorities is portrayed throughout Luke's Gospel as conversational combat.'

²⁵ The versions in Mark 3.1–6 and Luke 6.6–11 do not include group speech.

²⁶ See also John 5.10, where the Jews confront a man cured by Jesus for carrying his mat on the sabbath.

to give to the emperor what is the emperor's, leaves his opponents amazed (ἐθαύμαζον, 12.17). The Sadducees then confront Jesus on the concept of resurrection by presenting a complex scenario, expressed in we-language ('Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies...'), concerning multiple marriages (12.18–23); but Jesus overcomes this formidable challenge through reference to the power of God and his knowledge of Scripture (12.24–27). In contrast, a single scribe engages Jesus sincerely and is commended (12.34). The narrative juxtaposition presents to the reader a gulf between collective antagonism and individual openness. The Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees act with insincerity and are left speechless after Jesus answers their questions.²⁷

Indeed, a recurring outcome of these encounters is the silencing of collective opponents. After Jesus' counter-question in Matthew 22.41–46 on the origins of the Messiah, 'no one was able to give him an answer,' and 'from that day no one dared to ask him any more questions.' Amazement (cf. θαυμάζειν), as seen above, often coincides with this silence, signalling interpretive inadequacy rather than understanding, and—by leaving the narrative response suspended—inviting the reader to supply the insight the characters lack, thereby deepening the reader's own interpretive engagement.²⁸ The Gospel of Luke makes the connection explicit in its account of the discussion between Jesus, who is well aware of his opponents' craftiness, and the Pharisees and Herodians on taxation: 'being amazed... they became silent' (Luke 20.26). In John, the narrative substitutes violence for speech: when arguments fail, groups attempt stoning or arrest (John 7–8; 10.31–39), and bystanders interpret this silence as tacit recognition of Jesus' authority (John 7.25–26).

Across these examples, collective questioning and the amazement and silence it frequently provokes function as a key narratological

²⁷ See also the versions in Matthew 22.15–40 and Luke 10.25–28; 20.20–40, which, unlike Mark, are hostile towards the scribe (Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 841).

²⁸ On the rhetoric of silence in the Gospels and Acts, see Dinkler, "Silence as Rhetorical Technique"; Dinkler, *Silent Statements*; Dinkler, "Narrative Rhetoric"; Dinkler, "The Gospels," 620–622.

tool. Questions articulate the epistemic limits of groups; amazement and silence mark the collapse of their interpretive frameworks. Both mechanisms guide the audience toward the Christological truth that groups themselves fail to grasp.

(b) Evaluation

Collective speakers not only question Jesus; they also issue evaluative statements that reveal shared attitudes, beliefs, and emotional stances. These plural evaluations help shape how the reader interprets Jesus and the groups that respond to him. In John especially, collective affirmations of faith contrast sharply with collective rejection, creating a narratological polarity between groups who ‘see’ and groups who remain blind. Among positive evaluations, groups of followers often declare belief in Jesus’ identity. After Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritans, many tell the Samaritan woman, ‘We know that this is truly the Savior of the world’ (John 4.42). Their *we*-statement presents a shared recognition that arises from direct encounter rather than mediated testimony. In contrast, when the Jews demand, ‘If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly’ (John 10.24), Jesus responds that he has already revealed himself through works they refuse to accept (10.25–39). The contrast between Samaritan affirmation and Judean unbelief underscores how the Gospels use plural evaluations to distinguish receptive from resistant groups, and accordingly to orient the audience’s own evaluative stance by inviting alignment with those who recognise Jesus and distance from those who resist in misunderstanding. The readers of the Gospels are encouraged to adopt a more discerning, theologically informed perspective than the groups within the storyworld are themselves able to achieve.

Collective acclamations also frame Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. All four Gospels depict crowds or disciples citing Ps 118.26 in jubilant group speech that celebrates the arrival of the Messiah (Matthew 21.9; Mark 11.9–10; Luke 19.37–40; John 12.12–13). In Luke (19.37–40), the Pharisees’ attempt to silence the disciples and Jesus’ reply that ‘the stones will cry out’ highlight the narrative force of these voices, which draw attention to the theological importance of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. Although the speakers do not un-

derstand what must happen to Jesus in Jerusalem, their euphoric speech, mostly unmatched across the remainder of the Gospel narratives, reflects the salvific climax that is about to take place.²⁹

Collective voice is also used for negative evaluation, which the reader is encouraged to reject. During the Passion, mockery appears in plural speech: groups blindfold and beat Jesus ('Prophecy to us, Messiah!'), soldiers derisively hail him as 'King of the Jews', and chief priests taunt him on the cross ('He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him') (Matthew 26.67–68; 27.29, 42–43).³⁰ These collective jeers foreground both Jesus' suffering and the moral blindness of those who speak. Misunderstandings rendered in group voice—such as 'Let us see whether Elijah will come to save him' (Matthew 27.48–49; cf. Luke 23.36–37)—reinforce the theme of misperception and heighten the dramatic irony for the reader.

Moreover, opposing groups issue pluralised judgments meant to disqualify Jesus' authority. In John 8–9, collective accusations ('You are not yet fifty, and have you seen Abraham?', 8.57; 'You were born entirely in sins at birth; how dare you lecture us!', 9.34) illustrate the characteristic of misreading in unbelieving groups. Their evaluations, framed as plural pronouncements, narratively signal that these groups misunderstand the relationship between Jesus and the Father, a relationship that is presented repeatedly to John's audience.

A recurring example of hostile evaluation is the accusation that Jesus acts through demonic power. In Mark 3.22–30 and its Matthean and Lukan parallels,³¹ plural speakers assert that Jesus has

²⁹ The only other group speech passage that matches the excitement in these passages is Luke 2.13–14, spoken by a multitude of the heavenly host. Dinkler, *Silent Statements*, 144 argues that Jesus' acceptance of the disciples' praise signals his embrace of the suffering awaiting him in Jerusalem and the inevitability of messianic proclamation.

³⁰ See also Mark 14.65; 15.18, 31–32; Luke 22.63–65; 23.35–37; John 19.2–3.

³¹ Matthew 12.24 (the Pharisees); Mark 3.22–23 (scribes); Luke 11.15–20 (some in the crowds). The Pharisees make a similar accusation at Matthew 9.34.

an unclean spirit or casts out demons ‘by Beelzebul.’ These claims, presented to the reader through collective voice, are exposed as both illogical and theologically perverse, since earlier scenes have shown demons themselves acknowledging Jesus’ authority (see above).³² Jesus’ rebuttal identifies such accusations as a form of blasphemy, thereby inverting the evaluative stance of his opponents and marking their alignment with Satan (Mark 3.29–30). A similar dynamic appears in John 8.48–53, where the speaking group intensifies its hostility precisely as it fails to comprehend Jesus’ claims about eternal life and his relationship to Abraham.

Across these examples, collective evaluation functions as a narrative ‘barometer’: it reveals the moral and epistemic status of groups, guides the reader’s alignment or misalignment, and highlights the contrast between shared human misunderstanding and divine self-revelation. Plural praise and plural condemnation alike operate as communal focalization, offering interpretive cues that readers can adopt, negotiate, or reject.

(c) *Knowledge and (mis)understanding*

Opposing groups in the Gospels frequently demonstrate familiarity with Jewish Scripture, laws, and prophecy, yet the narratives consistently present their knowledge as partial, misdirected, or tainted with ignorance, stubbornness, and malice. Collective questioning often draws on Scripture or precedent, but the inability of these groups to grasp Jesus’ meaning, despite their learning, functions as a narrative signal of misunderstanding grounded in stance rather than intellect.³³ As several scenes suggest (e.g., Matthew 13.10–17; Luke 8.10), understanding is ultimately a matter of divine disclosure, not merely cognitive capacity.

The Gospel of John offers especially extensive portrayals of misunderstanding. In John 8.21–44, Jesus’ statements about his departure prompt the Jews to interpret his words literally (‘Is he going to kill himself?’), revealing their inability to perceive the theological register in which Jesus speaks. When some appear to believe (8.30),

³² Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 281.

³³ On the knowledge but lack of understanding of Jesus’ opponents, see, e.g., Zimmermann, “‘The Jews’,” 100–104 on the Jews in John.

the dialogue momentarily suggests the possibility of collective transformation, yet their subsequent objections ('We are descendants of Abraham...', 8.32–33) expose a continued reliance on inherited markers of identity rather than openness to Jesus' revelation. The dialogue pivots on Jesus' claim that their interpretive failure arises not from ignorance of tradition but from an inability to hear his word (ὅτι οὐ δύνασθε ἀκούειν τὸν λόγον τὸν ἐμόν, 8.43–44). Their collective voice thus dramatizes how deeply entrenched misunderstanding can coexist with impressive knowledge of Jewish heritage.

Similar dynamics appear elsewhere. Groups who approach Jesus with scriptural knowledge often deploy it strategically, sometimes insincerely, to test him.³⁴ Their use of inherited knowledge as a polemical tool becomes a structural marker of collective incomprehension. In narrative terms, these groups are not designed to progress toward insight; their role is to personify resistance within the storyworld. Individual figures may undergo development (e.g., the lone scribe in Mark 12; the Samaritan woman in John 4), but collective opponents generally remain static. Their we-voice reinforces this narrative fixity: to abandon misunderstanding would be to abandon the function they serve within the plot.

Crowds, by contrast, often exhibit volatility rather than rigidity. Matthew presents an especially striking shift. Crowds joyously announce Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (21.9), but crowds also demand his crucifixion (27.20–25). Whether or not these are intended as the same collective,³⁵ Matthew encourages the reader to draw a connection between them: both groups are labelled ὄχλοι, both speech acts are introduced with the same formulation (ἐκράζον λέγοντες), and the narrator tells the reader that the chief priests and elders had persuaded the crowds to ask for Jesus' death (27.20), thus indicating a shift in attitude.³⁶ The narrative effect is to portray collec-

³⁴ See above, pp 451–2.

³⁵ Mark, Luke, and John distinguish between the two groups. In Mark, those who go ahead and follow announce Jesus' entry (11.9–10), and the crowd calls for Jesus' death (15.8–14). In Luke, the multitude of the disciples announces his entry (19.37–40), and the chief priests, leaders and people call for his death (23.13–25). In John, a crowd praises his arrival (12.12–13) and the Jews call for his death (18.38–40).

³⁶ Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, Vol. 3, 589. In adopting this wording,

tive enthusiasm as fragile, rooted in incomplete understanding that can be redirected. The resulting instability illustrates how communal judgment, even when positive, remains vulnerable to misinterpretation of Jesus' identity and mission.

Other groups, including disciples and sympathetic followers, show varying degrees of insight. The Samaritans' declaration—"We know that this is truly the Savior of the world" (John 4.42)—presents a collective recognition grounded in direct encounter. In Matthew 14.33, after Jesus saves Peter from drowning, the disciples' exclamation—"Truly you are the Son of God"—marks a moment of shared awareness, even if such insight proves short-lived. Mark especially underscores the disciples' recurrent incomprehension, attributing it to their 'hardened heart' (ἡ καρδιά πεπωρωμένη, notice the use of the singular: Mark 6.52; 8.17).³⁷ Their collective voice thus alternates between recognition and confusion, a pattern also evident in crowds such as those in John 6, who shift from confessing Jesus as the awaited prophet to misunderstanding his teaching on the bread of life.

Even seemingly confident collective statements can mask incomplete comprehension. When Jesus promises to speak plainly of the Father (John 16.25–28), the disciples respond, 'Now we know that you know all things... by this we believe that you came from God' (16.29–30). Yet Jesus gently corrects them: true understanding will come only through the events of the Passion (16.31–32).³⁸ Their

Matthew adapts Mark 15.13–14. The influence of the leaders also appears at Mark 15.11.

³⁷ Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark," 399; de Campos, *Resisting Jesus*, 114. Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, 427–428 suggests that the hardening of their hearts, usually associated with Israel's enemies, might here have been chosen due to the other echoes of Exodus within the story.

³⁸ Hylan, "The Disciples," 219; see also R. Brown, *John*, 736. In Mark and Matthew, in particular, the disciples repeatedly fail to understand Jesus. Scholars have argued that this lack of understanding is likely intended to encourage self-reflection on the part of the reader (see Tannehill, "Disciples in Mark" and de Campos, *Resisting Jesus*, on Mark, and J. Brown, *Gospels as Stories*, 85–104 and Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 217–222 on Matthew). On the disciples' misunderstanding in Luke, see Dinkler, *Silent Statements*, 103–105, focusing on the Galilean ministry section of the Gospel (4.14–9.50).

premature claim to knowledge reveals the narrative tension between knowing and understanding, a distinction central to Johannine theology.

Luke's Emmaus narrative (24.13–32) offers a climactic example of this dynamic. The two disciples accurately recount recent events yet fail to interpret them. In one of the longest instances of group speech in the Gospels (19–24), across six consecutive verses the forlorn pair tell Jesus, without knowing his identity, of the crucifixion, the appearance of the angels, and the apparent fact that Jesus had not yet reappeared, as well as their unfulfilled hope that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel.³⁹ Their extended we-speech expresses both knowledge and bewilderment. Jesus' subsequent exposition, culminating in recognition at the breaking of bread, models the process by which misunderstanding becomes the occasion for instruction. Throughout Luke, Jesus has been presented as 'prime interpreter.'⁴⁰ The readers, already aware of Jesus' identity,⁴¹ witness the transformation from partial to full comprehension, a pattern that parallels their own interpretive journey:⁴² 'And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them (διεμήνευσεν αὐτοῖς) what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (24.27). This transitional journey toward interpretation and discovery, both for internal characters and for external audience, is marked lexically. As François Bovon notes, the verb διεμήνευσεν signals a gap between two realities that must be crossed, hence the prefix διά- ('through'); meaning must be mediated, carried across through acts of translation, transfer, and interpretation.⁴³

³⁹ For Fitzmyer, *Luke (X-XXIV)*, 1559, the lengthy conversation creates suspense for the reader, and Söding, *Lukas*, 267–268 notes that the disciples recapitulate the story of Jesus for the reader prior to Jesus revealing himself. See also Dinkler, "Building Character," 703–705.

⁴⁰ Coleridge, *Lukan Narrative*, 222–223; Dinkler, "Building Character," 705.

⁴¹ Dinkler, *Silent Statements*, 186 stresses the dramatic irony here generated by the reader's privileged knowledge over that of the in-text characters.

⁴² The same movement is found in the story about Jesus' use of the metaphor of "yeast" or "leaven" to warn his disciples about the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16.7–12; cf. Mark 8.17–21), and the story of the healing of the paralyzed man at Capernaum (Mark 2.6–12).

⁴³ Bovon, *Luke 3*, 374; Dinkler, "Building Character," 705.

Across all four Gospels, collective voices signify the contours of communal cognition: what groups know, misunderstand, and learn through Jesus' teaching. Supernatural beings alone possess unmediated knowledge of Jesus' identity (Matthew 8.29; Luke 24.1–9), whereas human groups, whether adversarial, sympathetic, or among his closest followers, operate with varying degrees of partial insight. Differences, nevertheless, emerge. Oppositional collectives, in particular, can deploy knowledge insincerely, exhibit a greater degree of wilful blindness, and persist in challenging Jesus, only to be silenced by his answers and counter-questions. Yet consistent patterns remain: all groups ask questions, struggle with incomplete understanding, and provide occasions for revelatory teaching. From a socio-cognitive perspective, these apparent failures become recurrent patterns of collective information processing, judgment formation, and misinterpretation, a dimension of Gospel narrative that has yet to receive sustained scholarly attention.

2. *Intra-Group Dynamics*

Ancient Greek narrative does not always grant readers extensive access to the internal workings of collective bodies. As Felix Budelmann has observed, groups in many ancient texts tend to appear primarily through their outward actions, public speech, or collective decisions rather than through sustained representations of their internal cognitive processes.⁴⁴ In this respect, the Gospels complicate a common tendency identified in classical scholarship. While collective bodies usually speak with a relatively unified voice in tragedy, historiography, and the ancient novel, the evangelists

⁴⁴ See Budelmann, "Group Minds," on Greek historiography and tragedy. Budelmann discusses a small number of ancient sources that show interest in the internal make-up or internal dynamics of groups (Aesch. *Ag* 1346–1371; [Eur.] *Rhes*. 527–564; Xen. *An.* 1.7), although his central thesis is that such interest is very rare and that collective minds "are essentially black boxes, viewed from outside, their different make-up and their internal cognitive processes invisible" (208). Similarly, see Chrysanthou, "Ancient Greek Historiography and the Ancient Novel," and "Group Minds in Ancient Narrative," on ancient Greek historiography and the novel. But cf. Savran, "Multivocality," on the internal dynamics of group speech in the Hebrew Bible.

often expose moments of collective deliberation, disagreement, and uncertainty. Expressions such as ‘they reasoned among themselves’ (οἱ δὲ διελογίζοντο ἐν ἑαυτοῖς, Matthew 16.7), ‘they said to one another’ (ἔλεγον... πρὸς ἀλλήλους, John 4.33),⁴⁵ and ‘they disputed among themselves’ (ἐμάχοντο... πρὸς ἀλλήλους, John 6.52) reveal not only group unity but also internal differentiation. Such moments dramatize collective cognition in process,⁴⁶ instances of what cognitive theorists describe as distributed or socially shared cognition, in which interpretive labour is spread across several members rather than located in any single mind.⁴⁷ They show how a group’s shared voice can contain multiple impulses, doubts, and possibilities. The Gospels therefore provide an important counterpoint to narratives in which collective actors function primarily as externally observed entities rather than as sites of explicit cognitive activity.

This emphasis on heterogeneity is especially pronounced in John,⁴⁸ where the narrator repeatedly marks division with σχίσμα (7.43; 9.16; 10.19). As C. K. Barrett observes, σχίσμα thematizes the mixed responses elicited by Jesus’ revelation.⁴⁹ Thus, during the festival of Tabernacles, the crowds split between those who view Jesus as a good man and those who suspect deception (John 7.12–13). Similarly, among the Pharisees investigating the healing of the man born blind, some reject Jesus for sabbath-breaking, while others question how a sinner could perform such signs (John 9.16–17).

⁴⁵ Alternatively, see John 7.35: ‘The Jews said to one another’ (εἶπον οὖν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι πρὸς ἑαυτούς); 11.56: ‘They were saying to one another’ (ἔλεγον μετ’ ἀλλήλων); 16.17: ‘Then some of his disciples said to one another’ (εἶπον οὖν ἐκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἀλλήλους); Luke 7.49: ‘But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves’ (καὶ ἤρξαντο οἱ συνανακείμενοι λέγειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς).

⁴⁶ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 99, 208, 226 equates such instances with ‘a soliloquy—an “inner monologue.”’

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Hutchins, *Cognition*; Plant and Stanton, *Distributed Cognition*; McNeese, Salas and Endsley, *Distributed Team Cognition*.

⁴⁸ This prominence might be related to the central role that the theme of conflict between belief and unbelief has in the plot of John (Culpepper, *Anatomy*).

⁴⁹ Barrett, *St. John*, 331.

These scenes juxtapose competing interpretations within the same collective, revealing plural voices as sites where disbelief, hesitation, and partial insight coexist. At the same time, they highlight Jesus' enigmatic status, whose identity provokes differing appraisals even among well-informed groups.

A similar polyphonic juxtaposition appears when the crowd debates Jesus' identity during the same festival: some identify him as the prophet, others as the Messiah, while others appeal to scriptural precedent to question his Galilean origins (John 7.40–42). The narrator again underscores that such divergent responses produce a *σχίσμα* (7.43). Here, group voices do not simply register collective misunderstanding; they dramatize the interpretive tension generated by Jesus' claims and origins.

The Synoptic Gospels likewise portray internal group deliberation. A notable example occurs when the chief priests and elders question Jesus' authority (Matthew 21.23).⁵⁰ Jesus' counter-question concerning John's baptism⁵¹ forces them into an internal debate (*οἱ δὲ διελογίζοντο ἐν ἑαυτοῖς*). This form of 'self-dialogue' is unique in terms of its more direct presentation of the intra-dialogic consideration of alternatives: 'If we say, "From heaven," he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" But if we say, "Of human origin," we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet' (Matthew 21.25–26). They therefore publicly feign ignorance (Matthew 21.27).⁵² This episode provides rare direct access to the collective mindreading of Jesus' opponents: they show an unusual and accurate anticipation of both Jesus' and the crowd's reactions,

⁵⁰ In Luke 20.1 and Mark 11.27 it is the chief priests and the scribes who come with the elders.

⁵¹ On the significance of this question, see Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, Vol. 3, 159–160. For counter-questions as answers in Rabbinic debates, see Bultmann, *Synoptic Tradition*, 42–45.

⁵² The version of the story is, in general, similar in Luke 20.2–8 and Mark 11.27–33. On soliloquies in ancient Greek literature, including the Gospels, as signalling a character's moment of crisis, see Dinkler, "Thoughts of Many Hearts"; Dinkler, "The Gospels," 617; Dinkler, "Interior Monologue," though her focus rests on individual rather than collective speakers. Cf. Gill, *Personality*, esp. 1–18, 503 (general index, s.v. 'internal dialogue') on Greek epic and tragedy; Chrysanthou, *Parallel Lives*, 66–78 on Plutarch's *Lives*.

yet their deliberation ultimately exposes their insincerity and inability to triumph in reasoning.⁵³ At the same time, the foregrounding of alternatives shows the disbelief surrounding the subject of Jesus' authority and origins.

Although the evangelists do not analyse the structural or sociological composition of groups, they consistently represent collective bodies as stable narrative entities whose unity remains intact despite moments of internal disagreement. These temporary divisions do not dissolve group identity; rather, they illuminate the recurring themes of collective incomprehension, amazement, fear, and uncertainty surrounding Jesus' authority. Polyphonic group scenes thus serve important narratological functions: they reveal the mental qualities and competing impulses within collectives, showcase Jesus' mastery of argumentative and interpretive situations, and reinforce his depiction as a teacher, judge, and omniscient figure who exposes and challenges the confusion or insincerity of his interlocutors. In doing so, they also illustrate, in narrative form, what contemporary social-cognitive theory terms distributed and socially embedded cognition: the ways groups think, reason, and (mis)interpret as collective cognitive subjects.

This analysis prepares the way for the next question: if groups can deliberate, divide, and reason collectively, to what extent do they also function as autonomous agents within the narrative's broader plot dynamics? Do they merely comment and react, or do they initiate, drive, and modify the course of events within the divine-human economy of each narrative?

3. *Collective Agency?*

Human groups are held responsible for their responses to Jesus, hence Jesus' repeated criticism of collective stubbornness, fear, or malice, but the Gospels rarely depict groups as initiators of decisive narrative action. The disciples, for instance, often perform actions,

⁵³ On their insincerity in this exchange, see Davies and Allison, *Saint Matthew*, Vol. 3, 161–162; cf. Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, 799–800, who interprets it as an inability to discern the truth. Although focusing on individuals' soliloquies, Dinkler, "Thoughts of Many Hearts," 384 notes that in Luke 'the thinking characters exhibit foolish self-talk.'

yet their agency is typically derivative, operating under Jesus' explicit instruction. Their procurement of the donkey (Mark 11.1–6; Matthew 21.1–3; Luke 19.29–34), their preparation for Passover (Matthew 26.17–18; Luke 22.7–13), and their missionary activity (Mark 6.7–13; Matthew 10.1–15; Luke 10.1–19, esp. 10.17: 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!')⁵⁴ all highlight their dependence on authority delegated by Jesus. Moments when they fail to act, such as their inability to cast out a demon (Matthew 17.14–20, esp. 17.19: 'Why could we not drive it out?'), further underscore the limits of their independent capacity.

Other groups function instrumentally as messengers or intermediaries. Jewish elders and friends speak on behalf of the centurion about his dying slave to Jesus (Luke 7.4–5), and the disciples of John the Baptist ask whether Jesus is 'the one to come' (Matthew 11.3). These speakers facilitate Jesus' activity but do not themselves shape events. Even when an antagonistic group attempts to control the narrative by circulating an explanation, namely when the chief priests instruct soldiers to report that Jesus' body was stolen (Matthew 28.12–15), this ultimately has little impact on the plot, for their claim is shown to be both false to the reader and ineffectual within the storyworld.

Opposing groups in John appear to wield considerable authority. The Jews can expel confessors from synagogues, as they do to the man born blind ('You were born entirely in sins, and you are trying to teach us?', 9.34). They generate fear among potential believers (7.14; 9.22; 12.42) and threaten Jesus with arrest or stoning (7.30; 8.59). Yet such actions repeatedly fail. Secret believers (such as Joseph of Arimathea, 19.38) still act, the resurrected Jesus continues his ministry (20.19),⁵⁵ and attempts to seize him are explicitly thwarted because 'his hour had not yet come' (7.30; 8.20).⁵⁶ In the same Gospel, Jesus' enemies indicate that Jesus possesses more influence than they do. Some declare that Jesus is deceiving the

⁵⁴ In Mark and Matthew, it is the Twelve, whereas in Luke it is the Seventy (or Seventy-Two).

⁵⁵ Cf. Matthew 27.62–66, where Jesus' enemies attempt to guard the tomb.

⁵⁶ See also John 7.44: 'Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him.'

crowds (7.12), the chief priests and Pharisees fear the consequences of inaction (11.47–48), the chief priests plan to kill Lazarus as his resurrection has led many Jews to believe in Jesus (12.10–11), and the Pharisees despair that the world has gone after Jesus (12.19). Taken together, these episodes make clear that the collective initiatives of Jesus' opponents—whether threats, expulsions, or plots—function less as effective instruments of control than as anxious, ultimately ineffectual responses to a figure whose influence consistently exceeds their grasp.

A similar dynamic appears in the Synoptics. In Luke, the people in the synagogue at Nazareth react negatively to Jesus' interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, but he eludes their hands: 'They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, to throw him off the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way' (Luke 4.29–30). Jesus' opponents, moreover, possess social and religious authority, yet they regularly delay action 'for fear of the people' (Mark 14.1–2; Matthew 21.46). Their questions and accusations pose threats but do not structurally determine the plot. When confronted with Jesus' counter-question about John's baptism, the authorities' internal deliberation reveals their calculating vulnerability: publicly committing to either answer would endanger their position (Matthew 21.23–27). Their strategic evasions further underscore the limits of their agency.

The Passion narratives constitute the clearest and most sustained instance of collective initiative. Here, antagonistic groups deliberate, arrest Jesus, and demand his execution (Mark 15.1, 8–14; Matthew 27.1, 20–25; Luke 23.13–25; John 18.38–40). In John 11.47–52, the chief priests and Pharisees articulate a collective plan in direct speech, expressing fear of Jesus' influence ('What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him'), and agreeing that it is 'better for one man to die for the people'. Yet even this moment of apparent collective power is framed as operating through divine design. As Jesus repeatedly states, he goes to Jerusalem knowing the outcome, fulfilling what 'must' occur (e.g., Mark 14.17–21; John 18.32). Attempts at arrest earlier in the narrative fail because 'his hour had not yet come' (John 7.30; 8.20). When violence succeeds, when Je-

sus is taken, tried, and crucified, the Gospel of John emphasizes that these events occur ‘so that Scripture would be fulfilled’ (John 19.24; 19.36). Agency is therefore real but bounded, subordinated to the divine timeline rather than autonomous human decision.

Collective responsibility remains significant: those who conspire against Jesus bear moral accountability (Matthew 27.25: ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’; Mark 14.21: ‘For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!’).⁵⁷ Yet narratively, their ability to act effectively arises only at the moment God permits. The Passion thus represents a paradoxical convergence: collective agency at its most vivid, yet fully integrated into a predetermined divine plan. Our analysis thus corroborates and further develops recent studies of the Gospels, which argue that God incorporates human responses into the divine plan and uses them to bring it to completion,⁵⁸ showing how the evangelists narratively stage collective action as effective only insofar as it aligns with what ‘must’ occur.

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that the canonical Gospels construct groups not merely as social aggregates but as collective cognitive subjects whose shared perception, intention, and epistemic stance constitute a crucial dimension of the narrative. In this light, the Gospels make far more extensive and sophisticated use of collective voice than is usually acknowledged, and their plural speakers deserve a place within broader discussions of ancient Greek narrative. By examining groups as questioners, evaluators, knowers (and mis-knowers), as internally differentiated entities, and as agents whose efficacy is carefully bounded, we have sought to show that the Gospels do not merely include ‘groups’ as a sociological given. Rather, they construct collective characters whose speech, cognition, emotions, and limited agency are integral to how these narratives stage revelation, incomprehension, and divine purpose.

In Section 1, it was shown that collective voices are not a margin-

⁵⁷ See also Matthew 26.24; Luke 22.22.

⁵⁸ See, e.g., Dinkler, *Silent Statements*, 210–211 on Luke.

al or incidental feature of the Gospels but a recurrent narratological resource. Disciples, crowds, authorities, opponents, demons, angels, bystanders, and other groups speak, evaluate, and interpret as plural subjects. When these groups use ἡμεῖς or first-person plural verb forms, the narrative presents them as collective speakers and frequently attributes to them forms of shared cognition, though, as we have seen, such cognition may range from strong consensus to internally differentiated and negotiated forms of understanding. Their questions expose the limits of human insight and invite Jesus' clarifying reply; their positive and negative evaluations work as a kind of communal focalization, signalling, through praise or rejection, how the reader is expected to align (or disalign). Their knowledge and misunderstanding map out the contours of communal cognition in the storyworld, demonstrating that familiarity with tradition does not guarantee comprehension, and that insight is conditioned by divine disclosure. Supernatural plural voices—angelic hosts, demonic collectives—form a revealing contrast: they possess immediate knowledge of Jesus' identity, whereas human groups advance by degrees, if at all.

Section 2 examined intra-group dynamics, showing that the Gospels frequently portray groups as sites of deliberation and internal diversity. Expressions such as διελογίζοντο ἐν ἑαυτοῖς, λέγειν πρὸς ἀλλήλους, and ἐρίζειν/μάχεσθαι πρὸς ἀλλήλους reveal collective reasoning shaped by competing impulses, fears, and interpretations. John's repeated use of σχίσμα makes this especially explicit, while the Synoptic account of the authorities debating how to answer Jesus about John's baptism exposes strategic mindreading and concern for public opinion. These scenes align with models of distributed cognition, in which reasoning is shared across agents rather than located in a single mind. They also show that Gospel groups can embody contested interpretations rather than unified viewpoints, distinguishing the evangelists' practice from many Greek narratives that tend to represent groups externally, as cognitive "black boxes," rather than opening up their internal cognitive processes. Although the evangelists do not offer sociological analyses of group formation, they invite readers to observe the mental complexity of collective bodies responding to Jesus. From a socio-cognitive perspective, what are often read as moral or theological failures emerge

instead as patterned forms of collective information-processing, an interpretive dimension that Gospel scholarship has yet to explore systematically.

Section 3 asked whether such plural speakers possess genuine narrative agency or whether they function chiefly as interpretive devices. Our analysis suggested a qualified answer. On the one hand, most collective action is derivative or reactive: disciples act under Jesus' instruction; intermediaries relay messages; opponents threaten, exclude, or circulate explanations that ultimately fail. On the other hand, the Passion narratives present antagonistic groups at the height of their power: they deliberate, arrest Jesus, and demand his crucifixion. Yet even here, their agency is consistently framed as operating within, and in service of, a larger divine plan. Human collectives bear moral responsibility—indeed they explicitly assume it—but their power remains limited within a theological framework. The Gospels thus present a paradox in which collective agency is at once real and subordinated to the temporal and teleological structure set by God.

Taken together, these three strands—collective voice as questioning and evaluation, distributed cognition, and bounded agency—reframe two related scholarly discussions. Within Gospel narratology, we argue that groups should be understood not only as characters or rhetorical devices but also as collective cognitive subjects whose shared judgments, misunderstandings, and evaluations shape narrative meaning. They provide interpretive cues, map the limits of human understanding, and dramatize the tension between human initiative and divine sovereignty, positioning Jesus in relation to communities that respond to him from distinct social, religious, and epistemic perspectives. Within classical studies, our analysis suggests that the Gospels offer rich evidence for the narrative representation of collective cognition, providing an important counterpoint to the tendency of many ancient narratives to portray collective bodies as cognitively opaque or primarily from an external perspective.

Viewed within this wider literary context, the Gospels also occupy a distinctive position within the broader history of ancient collective voice. Collective voices surface across a wide range of

Greek genres. In historiography,⁵⁹ as well as in epic,⁶⁰ communal viewpoints emerge through embedded civic or other group speeches that purport to represent the deliberations, attitudes, and judgments of cities, armies, or political bodies. In lyric and especially drama, collective perspectives are articulated through choral performance, where the chorus mediates between audience, characters, and authorial perspective while affirming communal identity and articulating shared norms and values.⁶¹ Philosophical dialogue likewise employs collective voices through personified supra-individual agents, such as the Laws in Plato's *Crito* (50a–54d), or the collective voice of the dead fathers in the *Menexenus* (246d–248d), whose speech embodies civic authority, transmits communal ideals, and lends legitimacy to moral exhortation.⁶² Oratory similarly constructs communal voices to evoke, shape, or critique public opinion, as in Demosthenes' appeals to the collective judgment of the Athenians.⁶³ Even later Greek prose fiction develops forms of collective voice, most notably in the performative first-person plural discourse of paired lovers, through which intimacy, shared perception, and collective identity are expressed.⁶⁴

The Gospels participate in this broader tradition while transforming it in accordance with their theological commitments. Like tragic choruses, they employ communal speech to articulate shared responses to extraordinary events; like historiography, they attribute judgments and actions to large social bodies; and like oratory, they use collective utterance to construct, reinforce, and contest commu-

⁵⁹ See above, n. 4; and on speeches by 'collective ethnics' in Xenophon's *Anabasis* and *Hellenica*, see Huitink and Rood, "Xenophon," 247–250, 257.

⁶⁰ See above, n. 4. More generally, on collectives and communal life in the Homeric epics, see Hammer, *Iliad as Politics*; Elmer, *Poetics of Consent*; Papanikos, "Collective Decision-Making."

⁶¹ See, e.g., Weiner, "Tragic Greek Chorus"; Calame, "Performative Aspects"; Gagné and Hopman, *Choral Mediations*.

⁶² See Stokes, *Dialectic*, 125–186; Thomason, "Law, Philosophy, and Civil Disobedience"; Kahn, "Funeral Oration"; Hatzistavrou, "Authority of Law."

⁶³ See, e.g., *First Philippic* (4.25); *On the False Embassy* (19.22, 335–336); *Against Meidias* (21.204, 211, 216), and *Against Aristocrates* (23.106–107). On speaking groups in Attic oratory, see Chrysanthou, "Speaking Groups."

⁶⁴ See above, n. 4. On this subject, see Chrysanthou, "Cognitive Mapping."

nal values. Nor are the Gospels unique in depicting groups that decide, question, disagree, or revise their views, since such phenomena can also be found elsewhere in Greek literature. What distinguishes the evangelists is rather the degree of narrative attention devoted to these processes and the central role they play in the unfolding of the story. Collective acts of interpretation, misunderstanding, debate, and reassessment recur across a wide range of Gospel groups and are closely tied to questions of revelation, identity, and response to Jesus. In this respect, the Gospels sustain an unusually persistent interest in the cognitive life of groups, making them a valuable contribution to wider discussions of how ancient literature imagined collective thought and shared understanding.

At the same time, the Gospel collective voice often functions differently from its counterparts elsewhere in Greek literature. Whereas choruses, civic bodies, and personified collectives frequently articulate authoritative communal norms, the plural voices of the Gospels tend to represent precisely the inherited assumptions and shared expectations against which Jesus argues. As in contemporary we-narratives discussed by Bekhta, where the communal voice frequently embodies conservative, provincial, or gossipy outlooks,⁶⁵ Gospel groups regularly articulate established views concerning Torah, piety, authority, and divine action. Their voices therefore serve both as a foil for Jesus' teachings and as a yardstick by which readers may evaluate competing claims about his identity, mission, and power. Collective misunderstandings are not merely instances of dramatic irony but part of a sustained reflection on revelation; bounded agency is not simply a concession to fate but a manifestation of divine purpose; and the recurring oscillation between insight and blindness draws readers into processes of discernment, self-examination, and decision. The evangelists thus invite their audiences, ancient and modern alike, to recognize that Jesus' story is not simply a narrative of 'I' and 'I', but of 'I' and 'we': Jesus and the traditions he contests and fulfils, Jesus and his followers, Jesus and his opponents, and ultimately Jesus and the communities that continue to receive and interpret these texts.

The implications of this conclusion extend beyond narratology.

⁶⁵ Bekhta, *Collective Storytelling*; Bekhta, *We-Narratives*.

If the evangelists repeatedly represent groups as collective cognitive subjects, then revelation, belief, misunderstanding, and resistance must be understood not merely as individual experiences but also as communal phenomena. Faith and unbelief emerge not only as personal responses but also as socially embedded patterns of perception, judgment, and action. Such a perspective highlights the communal dimensions of revelation that are sometimes obscured by readings focused primarily on individual characters. It also encourages fresh readings of familiar Gospel themes and episodes. The disciples' recurrent misunderstandings, for example, may be interpreted not simply as individual failures but as instances of collective learning in which shared assumptions are gradually challenged and revised. The volatility of the crowds appears not merely as inconsistency but as an illustration of the instability of communal judgment and the susceptibility of collective interpretation to competing influences. Likewise, the persistent resistance of Jesus' opponents may be read not only as moral obstinacy but also as the narrative representation of deeply entrenched communal frameworks of understanding that prove incapable of accommodating Jesus' claims. In each case, attention shifts from isolated individuals to the social processes through which knowledge, belief, misunderstanding, and evaluation are collectively formed, negotiated, and maintained.

More broadly, this perspective invites a reconsideration of the relationship between Jesus and the communities that surrounded him. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is portrayed not only as addressing individual persons but also as confronting, reshaping, and exposing collective modes of understanding. His teaching repeatedly engages shared assumptions about law, authority, purity, messiahship, and divine action. Viewed from this angle, the Gospels narrate not only the transformation of individual lives but also the contestation and reconfiguration of communal patterns of thought. Collective cognition thus becomes an important dimension of the evangelists' portrayal of revelation itself.

The implications of collective cognition may also extend beyond the narrative world of the Gospels themselves. Early Christian writers frequently conceived the Church as a community united not only by common belief but also by shared modes of perception,

judgment, worship, and spiritual participation. Basil of Caesarea, for example, describes the restoration of ecclesial *ὁμόνοια* as the healing of a fragmented body, in which the Church of Antioch is called to return ‘to a state of like-mindedness’ (πρὸς ὁμόνοιαν ἐπανελθεῖν) so that it may contribute to the health of the whole ecclesial body (*Ep.* 66). Gregory of Nazianzus likewise celebrates the reconciliation of divided believers as the gathering of the scattered children of God ‘into one’ (εἰς ἓν), walking together ‘in *homonoiā*’ toward the house of God (*Or.* 6.7, PG 35.729B–C [SC 405, p. 138]), and repeatedly presents ecclesial unity as a shared cognitive and spiritual participation modelled on the unity of the Trinity itself.⁶⁶ These developments suggest that the Gospels’ representation of groups learning, misunderstanding, questioning, believing, and praising together resonated with later Christian conceptions of the Church as a collective cognitive and spiritual community.

This perspective may also illuminate the importance of collective religious practices within Christian tradition. Pilgrimage, liturgical worship, processions, communal prayer, and shared acts of remembrance all presuppose forms of collective intentionality through which believers experience themselves as members of a larger body. John Chrysostom (*Hom.* 27 in *Rom.*, PG 60.647.4–14) provides a particularly illuminating example when interpreting Paul’s exhortation that believers glorify God ‘with one impulse/soul’ (ὁμοθυμαδόν) and ‘with one mouth’ (ἐν ἑνὶ στόματι). Chrysostom understands this not merely as verbal agreement but as participation ‘with one soul’ (μὴ ψυχῇ), a state in which shared faith, common worship, communal ritual practice, and mutual love unite believers into a single collective reality. The liturgical assembly thus becomes a setting in which collective cognition is not simply expressed but actively cultivated and reinforced. From this perspective, the collective voices of the Gospels may be understood as anticipating later Christian understandings of faith as a journey undertaken together, in worship, pilgrimage, and ecclesial life, rather than solely as a private spiritual experience.

⁶⁶ See, e.g., *Or.* 6.12, PG 35.737C [SC 405, p. 154]; *Or.* 6.13, PG 35.740A [SC 405, p. 154–156].

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University of Cyprus
chrysanthou.s.chrysanthos@ucy.ac.cy
ORCID: 0000-0002-9843-1153

University of Cyprus
waldron.byron@ucy.ac.cy
ORCID: 0000-0001-9846-9939

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