

Reconstructing the Pooh Community

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New Testament research is a field which has much to learn from comparative study - from observing the trends and results of research in parallel fields of study. So I begin my lecture this evening with an excursion into just such a parallel field - an excursion from which we may be able to return to recent trends in research on the Gospel of John with a fresh angle of vision.

Probably most of you will be familiar with the Winnie-the-Pooh stories - the popular children's books traditionally attributed to A A Milne. But you may not all be familiar with recent developments in Winnie-the-Pooh scholarship, which has been revolutionized in recent years as a result of one major methodological breakthrough which virtually all Pooh scholarship now takes for granted. This is the seminal insight that the Winnie-the-Pooh stories can be read on more than one level. Ostensibly, of course, they are the story of a group of animals living in a forest, who are in some sense identified with the soft toys belonging to Christopher Robin. But on another level they are the story of the community behind the books, that community of children for which the books were written. In the Winnie-the-Pooh books one specific community of English children early this century - now generally known to scholars as the Pooh community - has encoded for us a wonderfully revealing account of itself. With this methodological key it is possible to a large extent to reconstruct that community: its character, its history, its passions, its factions. For example, this community of children is clearly situated in a rural and rather isolated context - a small English village, one should assume. All the action of the story takes place in a forest, and the small caste of characters seems to live entirely in a world of its own. The outside world never impinges. Awareness that other children exist beyond the inward-looking circle of the Pooh community is indicated only by the very generalized and vague references to Rabbit's friends and relations.

Clearly the Pooh books were written for a specific community with a strong sense of its distinctive identity - a closed, one might even say sectarian group which prided itself on its special insider knowledge. We can see this in features of the writings which would have baffled any outsider but provide the insider with confirmation of their special status as privy to a kind of esoteric knowledge. Several times we find alleged explanations which to the outsider would not be explanations at all. For example:

When I first heard his name [Winnie-the-Pooh], I said, just as you are going to say, "But I thought he was a boy?"

"So did I," said Christopher Robin.

"Then you can't call him Winnie?"

"I don't."

"But you said - "

"He's Winnie-ther-Pooh. Don't you know what "*ther*" means?"

"Ah, yes, now I do," I said quickly; and I hope you do too, because it is all the explanation you are going to get."

(*Winnie-the-Pooh* [London: Methuen, 1963], p. 1).

Or again:

Nobody seemed to know where they came from, but there they were in the Forest: Kanga and Roo. When Pooh asked Christopher Robin, "How did they come here?" Christopher Robin said, "In the Usual Way, if you know what I mean, Pooh," and Pooh, who didn't, said "Oh!" Then he nodded his head twice and said, "In the Usual Way. Ah!"
(*Winnie-the-Pooh*, p. 88).

In that passage, Pooh, the bear of little brain, fails to understand, but the readers can pride themselves on their own superior understanding. Clearly we are dealing with sectarian literature which not only belongs within the group but bolsters that group's sense of superiority to the world in general - the general reader who cannot begin to understand what 'the usual way' would be.

The very distinctive nature of the Pooh community can be further appreciated when we compare it with other children's literature of the period, such as the Noddy books or the Narnia books (though it may be debatable whether these were already written at the time when the traditions of the Pooh community were taking shape). Words and concepts very familiar from other children's literature never appear in the Pooh books: the word school, e.g., is completely absent, as is the word toys, even though the books are ostensibly about precisely toys. Conversely, the Pooh books have their own special vocabulary and imagery: e.g. the image of honey, which is extremely rare in other children's literature (not at all to be found in the Narnia books, e.g., according to the computer-generated analysis by Delaware and Babcock), constantly recurs in the literature of the Pooh community, which clearly must have used the image of honey as one of the key buildingblocks in their imaginative construction of the world.

The stories afford us a fairly accurate view of some of the rivalries and disputes within the community. The stories are told very much from the perspective of Pooh and Piglet, who evidently represent the dominant group in the community - from which presumably the bulk of the literature originated, though here and there we may detect the hand of an author less favourable to the Pooh and Piglet group. The Pooh and Piglet group saw itself as central to the life of the community (remember that Piglet's house is located in the very centre of the forest), and the groups represented by other characters are accordingly marginalized. The figure of Owl, for example, surely represents the group of children who prided themselves on their intellectual achievements and aspired to status in the community on this basis. But the other children, certainly the Pooh and Piglet group, ridiculed them as swots. So throughout the stories the figure of Owl, with his pretentious learning and atrocious spelling, is portrayed as a figure of fun. Probably the Owl group, the swots, in their turn ridiculed the Pooh and Piglet group as ignorant and stupid: they used terms of mockery such as 'bear of very little brain.' Stories like the hunt for the Woozle, in which Pooh and Piglet appear at their silliest and most gullible, probably originated in the Owl group, which used them to lampoon the stupidity of the Pooh and Piglet group. But the final redactor, who favours the Pooh and Piglet group, has managed very skilfully to refunction all this material which was originally detrimental to the Pooh and Piglet group so that in the final form of the collection of stories it serves to portray Pooh and Piglet as oafishly lovable. In a paradoxical reversal of values, stupidity is elevated as deserving the community's admiration. We can still see the

point where an anti-Pooh story has been transformed in this way into an extravagantly pro-Pooh story at the end of the story of the hunt for the Woozle. Pooh and Piglet, you remember, have managed to frighten themselves silly by walking round and round in circles and mistaking their own paw-prints for those of a steadily increasing number of unknown animals of Hostile Intent. Realizing his mistake, Pooh declares: 'I have been Foolish and Deluded, and I am a Bear of No Brain at All.' The original anti-Pooh story, told by the Owl faction, must have ended at that point. But the pro-Pooh narrator has added - we can easily see that it is an addition to the original story by the fact that it comes as a complete non sequitur - the following comment by Christopher Robin: "'You're the Best Bear in All the World," said Christopher Robin soothingly.' Extravagant praise from the community's major authority-figure.

Such insight into the tensions between various factions in the Pooh community could easily be extended into more debatable territory (the identification of the Eeyore faction e.g. is still debated - some recent scholars have argued that Eeyore is best seen as representing the adults of the village). But I move on to give you an example of the way in which various crises in the community's history have left their mark in the traditions. One such crisis, we can be sure, was caused by the arrival in the village of an Australian family. This was a highly disturbing event for such a community of rural English children - otherwise isolated from the rest of the world. Rabbit (in the book) voices what must have been the general reaction of the community: 'We find a Strange Animal among us. An animal of whom we had never even heard before!' While Rabbit voices the indignation, Piglet expresses the community's fear of the newly arrived Australian children: 'Generally Regarded as One of the Fiercer Animals.' The Australians are represented in the story, of course, by Kanga and Roo. The story of the plan to capture baby Roo, which must have its basis in some rather nasty prank played by the Pooh and Piglet group on the Australians, should probably be read as the final redactor's attempt to surmount this crisis in the community by advocating the full and friendly integration of the Australians. The paradisaical picture with which the story ends ('So Kanga and Roo stayed in the forest. And every Tuesday Roo spent the day with his great friend Rabbit, and every Tuesday Kanga spent the day with her great friend Pooh, teaching him to jump...' and so on) is obviously idealistic, but brings to expression the final redactor's ideal for the community. This is a case where the social function of the story can be readily understood, as a means of defusing the tensions in the community caused by the arrival of outsiders, and promoting integration and cohesion. Successfully absorbed into the community, the characters of Kanga and Roo now function to reinforce the community's self-image as a friendly, mutually supportive group. Even the threatening oddity of the Australians - Kanga jumps - is transformed into a positive enrichment of the community, as Kanga teaches Pooh to jump. The community's sharp definition as a group of insiders over against putative outsiders is not breached, but reinforced as Kanga and Roo, initially perceived as intruding outsiders, are redefined as insiders.

Well, I hope you can begin to see how remarkably fruitful for Winnie-the-Pooh research has been this seminal, methodological insight that, whatever the stories may or may not tell us about the shadowy figure of Pooh himself, let alone Christopher Robin, primarily they tell the story of the Pooh community. This is their real value. They take us into the very concrete social context of a small community of English children struggling with the conflicts in their community, struggling to

define their identity. Of course, every element in the reconstruction I have offered to you is contested by some scholars; research and debate continue; the picture will undoubtedly change radically. But that is the excitement of research. There are dozens of Ph.D. theses still to be written before the time is ripe for someone to retrieve (affecting a kind of third naivety) the words of the little boy in the Hans Christian Andersen story.