Introduction

Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John: Reflections on the *Status Quaestionis*

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I. Introduction

Over the past three decades biblical scholarship has shown an increasing openness to the application of literary theory to the narratives of the Hebrew Bible[1] and the NT. Since the late 1970s, literary methods have been applied to the biblical narratives from seemingly every conceivable angle and the results have been nothing short of dramatic. In the new millennium narrative criticism and its related hermeneutical trajectories have become organic elements within the exegetical process even when practitioners are unaware of their methodological choice.[2]

Within Gospel studies narrative criticism traces its formative stages back to the early 1980s. In 1983, R. Alan Culpepper published his seminal work,

1 Some early narrative-critical contributions to the study of the Hebrew Bible include (in chronological order): Sean E. McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (AnBib, 50; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1971); Jacob Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978); Shemaryahu Talmon, 'The Presentation of Synchroneity and Simultaneity in Biblical Narrative', in Joseph Heinemann and Shnuel Werses (eds), *Scripta Hierosolymitana* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978), pp. 9–26; Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979); Shimon Bar-Efrat, 'Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative', *VT* 30 (1980), pp. 154–73; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); H. van Dyke Parunak, 'Some Axioms for Literary Architecture', *Semitics* 8 (1982), pp. 1–16; idem, 'Transitional Techniques in the Bible', *JBL* 102 (1983), pp. 525–48; Peter D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Adele Berlin, 'Point of View in Biblical Narrative', in Stephen A. Geller (ed.), *A Sense of Text: The Art of Language in the Study of Biblical Literature* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), pp. 71–113.

2 By 'related hermeneutical trajectories', I am referring to developments such as reader-response criticism, performance criticism, postmodern criticism and postcolonial criticism. The reception of narrative criticism within academic biblical studies helped pave the way for these hermeneutical methods to emerge over the past two decades. For more on the different expressions of narrative criticism within NT scholarship, see Mark Allan Powell, 'Narrative Criticism: The Emergence of a Prominent Reading Strategy', in Kelly R. Iverson and Christopher W. Skinner (eds), *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect* (SBLRBS, 65; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), pp. 19–43.

Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel,[3] which, along with Rhoads' and Michie's *Mark as Story* (1982),[4] helped usher in a new era in NT scholarship.[5] The resulting paradigm shift forced students of the NT narratives to consider the text in its final form before (and in some cases, apart from) the historical-critical questions that too often led to a fragmented reading of the text.[6] Though the past three decades have yielded a girth of scholarly contributions to the study of numerous aspects of the NT narratives, comparatively little has been done in the area of characterization until very recently.[7]

Never before in the history of NT scholarship has there been such a panoply of possibilities for approaching the NT narratives – a prospect which holds implications for narrative criticism in general, as well as the more narrow field of character studies. The present volume is concerned with current directions in both the theory and exegesis of Johannine characters. This essay aims to trace major movements in character studies in research on the Fourth Gospel from the mid-1970s to the current day, with a view to situating the other essays in this volume.

3 R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). For contemporary reflections on Culpepper's achievement 25 years after the book's initial publication, see Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore (eds), *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature* (SBLRBS, 55; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

4 David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982). The second edition, with contributions from a third author – Joanna Dewey – was published in 1999; the book is now available in a third edition (2012). For contemporary reflections on this book's achievements 30 years after its initial publication, see Iverson and Skinner (eds), *Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect* (2011).

5 These two studies were followed by narrative-critical analyses of Luke and Matthew, respectively. See Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (2 vols; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986–89); and Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1988).

6 A common early criticism of the narrative approach is that the discipline tends to be ahistorical, and in some cases, anti-historical, and therefore has the potential to lead to endless speculation and subjectivity. On this point, I cite the wisdom of my *Doktorvater*, Prof. Francis J. Moloney, who consistently insisted to his doctoral students that it is both disingenuous and intellectually dishonest to ask literary questions without also asking the requisite historical questions. In other words, narrative criticism at its very best is aided by the questions that are raised by historical-critical inquiry. The two disciplines, historical criticism and narrative criticism, must therefore work in concert with and complement one another.

7 Outside of Johannine scholarship, studies of character have been more common in recent Markan scholarship than in research on Matthew or Luke-Acts. Major treatments include, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), idem, *Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009); Joel F. Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel* (JSNTSup, 102; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); Susan Miller, *Women in Mark's Gospel* (LNTS, 259; London: T&T Clark, 2004); and Kelly R. Iverson, *Gentiles in the Gospel of Mark: 'Even the Dogs Under the Table Eat the Children's Crumbs'* (LNTS, 339; London: T&T Clark, 2007).

II. Representative Figures

The 1976 publication of Raymond F. Collins' study of 'representative figures' in John marked an important development in Johannine character studies.[8] In two essays, Collins – writing from within the Roman Catholic tradition – scrutinized a burgeoning tradition among historical-critical scholars that regarded Fourth Gospel characters as symbolic or representative types rather than historical persons. Despite the overall tendency among Roman Catholic exegetes to view most of John's characters in their historical individuality, there had been a movement within the same group to regard the mother of Jesus (2.1-11; 19.25-27) as a type of the Church, a model of faith, or even an eschatological presentation of 'woman'.[9] Outside the Catholic exegetical tradition, others had argued that the Beloved Disciple (13.18-30; 18.15-18; 20.3-10; 21.20-23) represented either the disciple *par excellence* or an ideal response of faith to Jesus. Some scholars even argued that the Beloved Disciple represented the Johannine church in its superiority over the Petrine tradition.[10] Still others had seen Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Nathanael and Thomas, among others, as performing a representative role in the Gospel. Collins attempted to consider the possible merits of symbolic interpretation while also keeping his discussion in the context of historical-critical inquiry. Situating his study against the backdrop of John's *Sitz im Leben*, Collins argued:

> [W]ithin the life-situation of the Johannine church we ought to envision a series of homilies directed to enkindling faith in Jesus. In the development of these homilies, various persons were chosen from the common gospel tradition or selected from his own tradition by the homilist in order to illustrate some point about the nature of faith, or lack of it, in Jesus Christ . . . [T]hey have been selected from the homiletic tradition of the Johannine tradition to teach the evangelist's readers something about that faith in Jesus Christ which is life-giving.[11]

8 The articles first appeared as 'The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel, Part I', *DRev* 94 (1976), pp. 26–46; idem, 'The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel, Part II', *DRev* 94 (1976), pp. 118–32 (reprinted together as 'Representative Figures', in idem, *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* [Leuven: Peeters/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], pp. 1–45). The citations that follow refer to the pagination of the reprinted version.

9 See, e.g., André Feuillet, 'Les adieux de Christ à sa mere (Jn. 19,25-27) et la maternité spirituelle de Marie', *NRT* 86 (1964), pp. 469–83; idem, 'L'heure de la femme (Jn. 16-21) et l'heure de la Mère de Jésus (Jn. 19,25-27)', *Bib* 47 (1966), pp. 169–84; idem, 'La signification fondamentale du premier miracle de Cana (Jo. II, 1-11) et le symbolisme johannique', *RevThom* 65 (1965), pp. 517–35. See also the symbolic interpretations advanced by Alfred Loisy, *Le quatrième Evangile. Les epîtres dites de Jean* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1921), and Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 18th edn, 1964).

10 See, e.g., A. Kragerud, *Der Lieblingsjünger im Johannesevangelium. Ein exegetischer Versuch* (Oslo: Universitätsverlag, 1959).

11 Collins, 'Representative Figures', pp. 7–8.

According to Collins, major Johannine characters[12] embody a dominant trait that is *intended by the evangelist* to represent a certain type of faith response to Jesus. These types are further meant to function as models for the audience to emulate or reject based upon the narrative's call to believe and follow the Johannine Jesus (cf., e.g., 20.31).

Though Collins' argument is built largely upon redaction-critical criteria and the concept of 'individualism' in John, he demonstrates a sensitivity to the literary integrity of the Gospel that anticipates the rise of narrative-critical method. He writes:

> [T]*he very literary style which characterizes the Fourth Gospel should lead the interpreter and reader to question the symbolic characters of the individuals who appear within its twenty-one chapters*. I would therefore propose that the individualism of the Fourth Gospel is a key to its interpretation, not in the sense that it determines the realized eschatology which is characteristic of the Gospel . . . *but in the sense that it provides a basic insight into the meaning of the Gospel*, the tradition that lay behind it, and the purpose for which it was compiled.[13]

Perhaps unwittingly, Collins helped move Johannine character studies closer to the type of narrative analysis that would begin to take shape a few years later. The more carefully nuanced representative approach advocated by Collins also became an interpretive option for understanding the function of Fourth Gospel characters in subsequent scholarship.

For example, in 1983, Margaret Pamment published an essay exploring the role of the Beloved Disciple in John.[14] Though her article contains no citations (and therefore it is difficult to ascertain what research was informing her argument), Pamment's discussion relies heavily on a representative understanding of character. She notes that Nicodemus '*represents* the secret admirer rather than the open advocate', and that calling him 'the Pharisee who came to Jesus by night' would have 'emphasized his *representative character*'.[15] She also acknowledges that the evangelist uses names 'in cases where the *representative character* of the individual or group is important, and where naming individuals would distract from the centre of interest in Jesus'.[16] Like Collins, Pamment regards Johannine characters as archetypal figures embodying a dominant trait that symbolizes a specific, hoped-for

12 Collins considered 15 characters: John the Baptist (1.19-34; 3.25-30), Nathanael (1.43-51), Nicodemus (3.1-15; 7.50; 19.39), the Samaritan woman (4.3-42), the royal official (4.46-54), the lame man (5.1-18), the man born blind (9.1-34), Philip (1.43-51; 6.1-15; 12.20-36; 14.1-14), Lazarus (11.1-44; 12.1-11), Judas (6.67-71; 12.1-8), Mary (2.1-11; 19.25-27), Mary Magdalene (20.1-2, 11-18), Thomas (20.24-29), Peter (ch. 21), and the Beloved Disciple (21.2-7, 19-24).

13 Ibid., p. 4 (emphasis added).

14 Margaret Pamment, 'The Fourth Gospel's Beloved Disciple', *ExpTim* 94 (1983), pp. 363–7.

15 Ibid., p. 364 (emphasis added).

16 Ibid. (emphasis added).

response from the audience. She also seems to have an appreciation for the Gospel's literary integrity though she sets forth her argument without a specific discussion of the literary dimensions of the text.

In another essay from 1983, W. R. Domeris explores the 'Johannine Drama', finding a number of parallels between the Gospel and Greek tragedy.[17] Regarding Fourth Gospel characters, Domeris notes: 'As John introduces each of his main characters, Nathanael, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Martha, Thomas, and others, we become aware . . . [that] *they serve a representative function*'.[18] Thus,

> *Nathanael represents the view of the true Israelite* (cf. 1:47), who recognizes Jesus as the messianic king and the fulfilment of the hope of the Old Testament (cf. 1:45); *Nicodemus represents the secret disciples*, who for fear of the Jews, choose to remain within the confines of the Synagogue (cf. 12:42f.); *Martha, Peter, the blind man and Thomas represent the true believers*, who come to Jesus and discover in him eternal life . . . The confessions, which occur at key points, are clearly constructed to depict *the point of view of the represented community*.[19]

Though it is outside the scope of this survey, an examination of commentaries, monographs and other literature of this period would reveal that the view advocated by Collins became an increasingly important position among scholars during the two decades that followed his essays. It should also be noted that, when it was first articulated, Culpepper's discussion of character in *Anatomy* stood squarely on the shoulders of Collins' contributions.[20] Prior to the rise of narrative criticism within Gospel studies, the representative model was one of the more important approaches to understanding Johannine characters.

More recent work on Johannine characterization has identified two inherent weaknesses in the representative approach. First, the model tends to categorize characters in a way that fails to account for the complexity that we find in many Johannine figures.[21] The work of Fred W. Burnett[22] and Cornelis Bennema[23]

17 W. R. Domeris, 'The Johannine Drama', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 42 (1983), pp. 29–35.

18 Ibid., p. 32 (emphasis added).

19 Ibid. (emphasis added).

20 'In John's narrative world the individuality of all the characters except Jesus is determined by their encounter with Jesus. The characters represent a continuum of responses to Jesus which exemplify misunderstandings the reader may share and responses one might make to the depiction of Jesus in the gospel' (Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 104). It is not a coincidence that this comment from Culpepper is accompanied by a footnote citing Collins' essay on representative figures.

21 See the helpful critique of this weakness in James L. Resseguie, *The Strange Gospel: Narrative Design and Point of View in John* (BIS, 56; Leiden: Brill, 2001), ch. 3.

22 Fred W. Burnett, 'Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels', *Semeia* 63 (1993), pp. 3–28.

23 See Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), esp. pp. 12–15. Though he does not cite the study in the book, Bennema's theory is heavily reliant upon Burnett's foundational article.

has been particularly helpful for bringing this weakness to light. Second, there is a general lack of unanimity among scholars as to what trait the representative figures actually embody. In other words, it has proven difficult to arrive at a consensus on the *representative function* of each supposedly *representative* figure. Despite these weaknesses, however, the representative approach has not been completely abandoned in contemporary Johannine scholarship, and some have even found it compatible with a literary approach.[24]

III. Culpepper and the Rise of Narrative Criticism

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1983) to contemporary Johannine research.[25] In the late 1970s and early 1980s, redaction criticism had become the dominant interpretive framework within which Gospel scholars were working.[26] Within Johannine studies scholars were particularly concerned with proposing various source theories, identifying concrete stages in the Gospel's development, and connecting the dots between the so-called Johannine community and John's *Sitz im Leben*. Aided by a strong awareness of contemporary literary theory as applied in everyday English courses, Culpepper undertook an analysis of the *literary design* of John's Gospel. As pedestrian as it now seems, it was groundbreaking at that time to insist that the narrative be read as a coherent story with emphasis primarily on the world *within the text*. Such an approach was truly novel in the world of scholarship obsessed with both the sources and stages

24 See, e.g., Arthur H. Maynard, 'The Role of Peter in the Fourth Gospel', *NTS* 30 (1984), pp. 531–47; Kevin Quast, *Peter and the Beloved Disciple: Figures for a Community in Crisis* (JSNTSup, 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), ch. 1; Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), pp. 33–77; Jocelyn McWhirter, *The Bridegroom Messiah and the People of God: Marriage in the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS, 138; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), ch. 2; and Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John* (NCBC; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 58–9, 67, 94, 134. See also, Rekha M. Chennattu, RA, 'Women in the Mission of the Church: An Interpretation of John 4' (Paper presented at the Conference on 'Mission in Asia in the Third Millennium: Models for Integral Human Liberation', Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 14–17 April 1999).

25 Thatcher states it well when he writes that 'the most enduring contribution of *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* rose from its point where the book diverged most sharply from the mainstream of its day: the thesis that John's story is inherently meaningful, regardless of its sources, composition history, or historical value. At a time when scholars were deeply absorbed in speculations about literary sources, the Johannine community, and the number of revisions leading up to the present text, Culpepper boldly declared that a close reading of the Gospel of John as a unified narrative could produce striking new insights' (Tom Thatcher, 'Anatomies of the Fourth Gospel: Past, Present, and Future Probes', in Thatcher and Moore [eds], *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism*, p. 1).

26 There is not space here to rehearse the history of redaction criticism and its relative merits and deficiencies *vis-à-vis* narrative criticism. For a helpful overview of methodological developments from source criticism to modern reader-oriented methods, see Francis J. Moloney, *The Living Voice of the Gospels* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), pp. 309–42.

of the Gospel's development. That said, Culpepper's chapter on characters, the second longest in the book, did not stray far from the predominant discussions taking place in literary circles at that time. Of particular importance to his treatment of Johannine characters were categories set forth in Collins' two articles as well as discussions found in the works of Seymour Chatman, E. M. Forster and W. J. Harvey.

a. Chatman's Story and Discourse

In his influential book, *Story and Discourse*,[27] Seymour Chatman addressed the dichotomy between characters as representations of reality and characters as mere plot functionaries, preferring the former. This debate over 'realist' and 'purist' approaches continues to be an important area of discussion among literary critics. The realist (or mimetic) approach argues that characters 'acquire an independence from the plot in which they occur, and that characters can be discussed apart from their literary contexts'.[28] Practically, this means that characters can be extracted from their narrative worlds and treated as real people in hypothetical situations in the real world. This approach is primarily associated with the Romantic writers of the nineteenth century,[29] and finds fewer advocates today among theoreticians.

The other side of the discussion is represented by the purist (or functional) approach, which rejects the idea that characters can be taken out of their literary contexts or viewed in hypothetical, non-literary situations as autonomous individuals. The purist view is derived from an Aristotelian understanding of character. According to Aristotle, 'action' is the most important element in any dramatic presentation; the secondary element in the drama is the agent who performs the action.[30] The Aristotelian approach to characterization almost completely subjugates the character to the action performed, and in so doing reduces the character to a formless agent. Chatman notes that 'Aristotle's general formulation of character and characterization is not appropriate to a general theory of narrative, although, as usual, he provokes questions that cannot be ignored'.[31] If Aristotle's categories raise the question of the character's importance, the modern purist approach builds on that foundation by raising the question of the character's autonomy apart from the narrative in which that character originally appears.

27 Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

28 Burnett, 'Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels', p. 4.

29 Colleen M. Conway (*Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* [SBLDS, 167; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999], p. 50) notes that this view 'saw characters as more or less autonomous beings who possessed motives, values, and personality, all of which were open to analysis by the critic'.

30 See the discussion of Aristotle's *Poetics* in Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, pp. 108–10.

31 Ibid., p. 110.

Culpepper acknowledged that Chatman's study, while valuable, had limited implications for the study of the Fourth Gospel, since 'most of the characters in it appear so briefly that it is difficult to form an impression of them as "autonomous beings"'.[32] Practically, this meant that, for Culpepper, most Johannine characters are reduced more to the role of plot functionaries.

b. Forster's Aspects of the Novel

In his classic work, *Aspects of the Novel*,[33] E. M. Forster asked whether characters should be viewed as human beings, historical persons, or something else altogether.[34] Prefiguring the conclusions of the purist camp, Forster concluded that characters should not be extracted from the narrative and given unconditional autonomy.[35] However, Forster's deeper concern in posing the question was to understand how characters function with respect to the other elements of the narrative. This is the context in which Forster set forth his well-known distinction between 'round' and 'flat' characters.[36] According to Forster, 'round' characters are those prominent figures in any story that display a host of potentially conflicting traits, while 'flat' characters are predictable and one-dimensional. Using these categories, one might refer to the Jesus of John's Gospel as 'round' inasmuch as he displays a host of emotional characteristics and complex motivations.[37] One might also refer to the uncomprehending characters of the Fourth Gospel as 'flat' inasmuch as they are primarily defined by their consistent misperception of the mission and message of Jesus. To do this, however, would be to overstate the case.

Though Culpepper cited Forster's categories approvingly in his discussion of character in *Anatomy*, many narrative critics today have found this dichotomy to be problematic in that it too rigidly compartmentalizes characters that seem to exist on a more expansive spectrum. For this reason, the distinction between round and flat characters, though widely referenced, has fallen out of favour with NT scholars employing a narrative approach. Strict adherence to these two categories would fail to recognize the complexity in many of the minor characters found in the canonical Gospels. Seemingly flat characters can express genuine insights and be momentarily transformed into characters with 'rounded edges'.[38] In the Fourth Gospel this is particularly true of Nicodemus, who early

32 Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 102.

33 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927).

34 'What is the difference between people in a novel and people like the novelist or like you, or like me, or Queen Victoria? There is bound to be a difference. If a character in a novel is exactly like Queen Victoria – not rather like but exactly like – then it actually is Queen Victoria, and the novel, or all of it that the character touches, becomes a memoir' (Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 71).

35 Ibid., p. 100.

36 Ibid., pp. 103–25.

37 For instance, Jesus cleanses the temple in a fit of anger (2.1-22), weeps at the death of his friend Lazarus (11.35), and is continually driven by the Father's will (5.16-44; 6.35-51; 8.16-29; 10.14-18; 12.27-50).

38 Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (*Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* [London:

in the narrative displays an inability to understand Jesus' message and mission (3.1-15) but later appears as a follower of (or at least sympathizer with) the crucified Jesus (19.38-42). His seemingly 'flat' characteristic of misperception is 'rounded' by the narrator to indicate not just a new characteristic (i.e., belief) but rather a genuine, thoroughly Johannine transformation. Burnett expresses this concept well when he writes that it 'seems best to speak of *degrees of characterization* in biblical texts, and to plot textual indicators on a continuum for any particular text, from words at one pole to "persons" at the other pole'.[39] This continuum must include at least three categories: (1) *agents*, which have little or no development and function essentially to advance the plot; (2) *types*, which have differing levels of character development and typically reveal a prominent, mainly static trait; and (3) *full-blown characters* with differing levels of direct and indirect characterization. Each of these individual categories must also be understood to exist on a continuum.

c. Harvey's Character and the Novel

In *Anatomy*, Culpepper also referenced W. J. Harvey's classification of characters into protagonists, intermediate characters (e.g., cards and *ficelles*), and background characters. [40] Harvey's categories – particularly protagonist and *ficelle* – seemed to fit in nicely with Culpepper's classification of Johannine characters. Jesus is the clear protagonist of the story, while most of the other characters function as *ficelles* – 'typical characters easily recognizable by the readers. They exist to serve specific plot functions, often revealing the protagonist, and may carry a great deal of representative or symbolic value.'[41]

These basic categories (mimetic vs functional, round vs flat, protagonist vs *ficelle*) were the building blocks of Culpepper's brief exposition of characterization. From there he provided character analyses of Jesus and three groups of characters – the disciples, the 'Jews', and other minor characters[42] – with little further discussion devoted to a theory of character. For a considerable period after the publication of *Anatomy*, little work was done toward the development of a comprehensive theory of character, though studies of individual characters proliferated.

Methuen & Co., 1983], p. 61) comments: 'A trait may be implied both by one-time (or non-routine) actions . . . One-time actions tend to evoke the dynamic aspect of character, often playing a part in a turning point in the narrative. By contrast, habitual actions tend to reveal the character's unchanging or static aspect, often having a cosmic or ironic effect, as when a character clings to old habits in a situation which renders them inadequate.'

39 Burnett, 'Characterization and Reader Construction', p. 19 (emphasis added).

40 See W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), pp. 52–73.

41 Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 104.

42 Culpepper's discussion of minor characters includes: John the Baptist, Jesus' mother, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the royal official, the lame man, the brothers of Jesus, the blind man, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, and Pilate. See *Anatomy*, pp. 132–44.

As narrative criticism continued its move into mainstream biblical scholarship, more publications on Johannine characters and characterization began to appear. The period between 1989 and 2003 saw the publication of numerous individual studies of Johannine characters including the mother of Jesus,[43] Nicodemus,[44] the Samaritan woman,[45] Peter,[46] Judas,[47] Lazarus,[48] Mary and Martha,[49] 'the Jews',[50] God,[51] various women,[52] and minor characters.[53] This period also saw the publication of numerous monographs focused on issues of character in the Fourth Gospel: Robert G. Maccini's *Her Testimony is True* (1996),[54] David

43 Judith M. Lieu, 'The Mother of the Son in the Fourth Gospel', *JBL* 117 (1998), pp. 61–77.

44 Jouette M. Bassler, 'Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel', *JBL* 108 (1989), pp. 635–46; Debbie Gibbons, 'Nicodemus: Character Development, Irony and Repetition in the Fourth Gospel', *Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Bible Societies* 11 (1991), pp. 116–28.

45 Stephen D. Moore, 'Are There Impurities in the Living Water that the Johannine Jesus Dispenses? Deconstruction, Feminism and the Samaritan Woman', *BibInt* 1 (1993), pp. 207–27; cf. also, ch. 5, entitled 'The Samaritan Woman', in Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), pp. 109–35.

46 Arthur J. Droge, 'The Status of Peter in the Fourth Gospel: A Note on John 18:10-11', *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 307–11.

47 Tom Thatcher, 'Jesus, Judas, and Peter: Character by Contrast in the Fourth Gospel', *BSac* 153 (1996), pp. 435–48.

48 Wilhelm Wuellner, 'Putting Life Back into the Lazarus Story and Its Reading: The Narrative Rhetoric of John 11 as the Narration of Faith', *Semeia* 53 (1991); Raimo Hakola, 'A Character Resurrected: Lazarus in the Fourth Gospel and Afterwards', in David Rhoads and Kari Syreeni (eds), *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism* (JSNTSup, 184; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 223–63.

49 Francis J. Moloney, 'The Faith of Mary and Martha: A Narrative Approach to John 11,17-40', *Bib* 75 (1994), pp. 471–93; idem, 'Can Everyone Be Wrong? A Reading of John 11.1–12.8', *NTS* 49 (2003), pp. 505–27.

50 Francis J. Moloney, '"The Jews" in the Fourth Gospel: Another Perspective' *Pac* 15 (2002), pp. 16–36.

51 Marianne Meye Thompson, '"God's Voice You Have Never Heard, God's Form You Have Never Seen": The Characterization of God in the Gospel of John', *Semeia* 63 (1993), pp. 177–204.

52 Turid Karlsen Seim, 'Roles of Women in the Gospel of John', in L. Hartman and B. Olsson (eds), *Aspects on the Johannine Literature* (ConBNT, 18; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987), pp. 56–73; Ingrid R. Kitzberger, 'Mary of Bethany and Mary of Magdala – Two Female Characters in the Johannine Passion Narrative: A Feminist Narrative-Critical Reader-Response', *NTS* 41 (1995), pp. 564–85; idem, 'Synoptic Women in John: Interfigural Readings', in Ingrid R. Kitzberger (ed.), *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-viewed* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 77–111; Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, 'Border-Crossing and Its Redemptive Power in John 7:53–8:11: A Cultural Reading of Jesus and *the Accused*', in Kitzberger (ed.), *Transformative Encounters*, pp. 267–91. See also, ch. 6, 'A Woman Accused of Adultery', in Gench, *Back to the Well*, pp. 136–89.

53 Colleen M. Conway, 'Speaking Through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel', *BibInt* 10 (2002), pp. 324–41.

54 Robert G. Maccini, *Her Testimony is True: Women as Witnesses according to John* (JSNTSup, 125; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

Beck's *The Discipleship Paradigm* (1997),[55] Adeline Fehribach's *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom* (1998),[56] Colleen Conway's *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel* (1999),[57] Peter Dschulnigg's *Jesus begegnen* (2002),[58] Stan Harstine's *Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel* (2002),[59] Susanne Ruschmann's *Maria von Magdala im Johannesevangelium* (2002),[60] and Margaret Beirne's *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel* (2003).[61] Though character studies were advancing during this period, little was done to promote a comprehensive theory of character that would help to explain how characters function in the Fourth Gospel. This trend, however, has been reversed during the past decade, another productive period in which methods for approaching character studies have been at the forefront of scholarly deliberations.

IV. Characters and Theories (2003–Present)

Over the past decade, there has been a surge of interest in the characters of the Fourth Gospel,[62] and in the past six years alone, no less than eight monographs

55 David R. Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (BIS, 27; Leiden: Brill, 1997).

56 Adeline Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist Historical-Literary Analysis of the Female Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998).

57 Cf. n. 29 above for full bibliographic information.

58 Peter Dschulnigg, *Jesus begegnen: Personen und ihre Bedeutung im Johannesevangelium* (Münster: Lit, 2002).

59 Stan Harstine, *Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel: A Study of Ancient Reading Techniques* (JSNTSup, 229; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

60 Susanne Ruschmann, *Maria von Magdala im Johannesevangelium: Jüngerin—Zeugin—Lebensbotin* (2002).

61 Margaret M. Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals* (JSNTSup, 242; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

62 See the following essays (in order of appearance): James M. Howard, 'The Significance of Minor Characters in the Gospel of John', *BSac* 163 (2006), pp. 63–78; Humphrey Mwangi Waweru, 'Jesus and Ordinary Women in the Gospel of John: An African Perspective', *Swedish Missiological Themes* 96 (2008), pp. 139–59; Andrew T. Lincoln, 'The Lazarus Story: A Literary Perspective', in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (eds), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 211–32; Marianne Meye Thompson, 'The Raising of Lazarus in John 11: A Theological Reading', in Bauckham and Mosser (eds), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, pp. 233–44; Ruben Zimmerman, 'The Narrative Hermeneutics of John 11: Learning with Lazarus How to Understand Death, Life, and Resurrection', in Craig Koester and Reimund Bieringer (eds), *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (WUNT, I/222; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), pp. 75–101; Steven A. Hunt, 'Nicodemus, Lazarus, and the Fear of the "the Jews" in the Fourth Gospel', in Gilbert van Belle, Michael Labahn and P. Maritz (eds), *Repetition and Variation in the Fourth Gospel: Style, Text, Interpretation* (Louvain: Peeters, 2009), pp. 199–212; William M. Wright IV, 'Greco-Roman Character Typing and the Presentation of Judas in the Fourth Gospel', *CBQ* 71 (2009), pp. 544–59; Cornelis Bennema, 'The Character of John in the Fourth Gospel', *JETS* 52 (2009), pp. 271–84; idem, 'The Identity and Composition of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John', *TynBul* 60 (2009), pp. 239–63.

have appeared, most of which advance a specific method for approaching Johannine characters.

In 2006, Philip Esler and Ronald Piper drew on social-identity theory to examine the siblings of Bethany.[63] They found that Lazarus, Mary and Martha function as important prototypes or ideal characters for the audience of the Fourth Gospel. In 2007, Judith Hartenstein's Marburg dissertation, *Charakterisierung im Dialog*, used a narrative approach to examine Mary Magdalene, Peter and the mother of Jesus both in the Fourth Gospel and in other early Christian texts (including the Synoptics and the *Gospel of Thomas*).[64] She sees John's presentation of characters as more complex than is usually suggested but notes that characters change very little throughout the story. Also appearing in 2007 was Bradford Blaine's revised dissertation, *Peter in the Gospel of John*.[65] Like Hartenstein, Blaine also employs a narrative-critical approach that takes seriously both the Gospel's sources and its historical setting. Blaine's study is driven by the concern to refute the common opinion that the Fourth Gospel presents Peter in a substantially negative light.

Three more monographs on Johannine characterization were published in 2009. The first to appear was my revised dissertation, *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict?*,[66] which sought to analyse Johannine characters with a view to evaluating the thesis that the Fourth Gospel contains an 'anti-Thomas polemic'. After looking at Thomas, Peter, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Mary, Martha, Philip, Judas (not Iscariot), and the disciples as a representative group, I concluded that the Johannine presentation of Thomas is part of a wider literary pattern within the story where characters misunderstand the mission and message of Jesus, and thus the charge of an 'anti-Thomas polemic' is unfounded. I also contend that misunderstanding should be one of the primary foci guiding our understanding of John's characters. The next book to appear in 2009 was Susan Hylen's *Imperfect Believers*.[67] Hylen examines Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the disciples, the Jews, Martha, Mary, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and draws out an important element of their characterization: ambiguity. She argues that it is difficult to discern whether John's characters exercise a satisfactory belief in Jesus. Many characters seem to grasp important insights about Jesus but fail to believe or understand in other key areas. Thus, ambiguity is the lens through which we should view John's characters. Cornelis Bennema's book, *Encountering*

63 Philip Esler and Ronald Piper, *Lazarus, Mary and Martha: A Social-Scientific and Theological Reading of John* (London: SCM, 2006).

64 Judith Hartenstein, *Charakterisierung im Dialog: Maria Magdalena, Petrus, und die Mutter Jesu im Johannesevangelium* (NTOA, 64; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

65 Bradford B. Blaine, Jr, *Peter in the Gospel of John: The Making of an Authentic Disciple* (AcBib, 27; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

66 Christopher W. Skinner, *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict? Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question* (PTMS, 115; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

67 Susan Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

Jesus,[68] also appeared in 2009, and that work more than any of the aforementioned volumes demonstrates a concern for an overarching theory of character. Bennema considers nearly all of John's characters using a method that categorizes characters into one of four categories: agent (or actant), type (or stock character), character with personality, or individual (or person). In addition to his classification system, Bennema's discussion of each character is accompanied by a chart that plots the character's appearances, identity, speech and actions, character classification, degree of characterization, and response to Jesus. More than any other recent scholar, Bennema has demonstrated a concern for developing a comprehensive theory of character – a topic to which he returns in this volume.

In his 2010 dissertation, Nicolas Farelly used narrative analysis to examine the faith and comprehension of five Johannine disciples – Peter, Judas, the Beloved Disciple, Thomas and Mary Magdalene.[69] Farelly asserts that the disciples have genuine faith and life from a very early point in the narrative, but thereafter struggle to come to terms fully with Jesus' identity, words and mission. Also appearing in 2010 was Michael Martin's dissertation, *Judas and the Rhetoric of Comparison*.[70] Martin situates the negative depiction of Judas in the Fourth Gospel in the context of the ancient practice of *genus syncrisis*, or the comparison of types. This practice compares two real-world groups by comparing ideal or extreme representatives from each group. This practice, argues Martin, creates a two-level drama in which it is possible to both see the superiority of one literary type and apply this superiority to the group that the character in question represents. These more recent studies have given way to a concern for developing a theory of character as it applies to the characters of the Fourth Gospel, which is one major concern of the present volume.

Though not a movement within narrative criticism *per se*, Richard Bauckham's theory of eyewitness testimony in the Gospels also deserves mention in our survey. In his 2008 monograph, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*,[71] Bauckham argued that the canonical Gospels are best understood against the background of ancient historiography in which the best historical practice was to rely on eyewitness testimony (αὐτοψία). Challenging the form-critical position that the Gospel material about Jesus circulated in oral form for a lengthy period in the Church before it was recorded by the evangelist, Bauckham asserts that the Gospels were based largely on eyewitness testimony; he also contends that John was actually composed by an eyewitness – John the elder rather than one of the Twelve.[72] Bauckham's thesis has implications for character studies inasmuch

68 Cf. n. 23 above for full bibliographic information.

69 Nicolas Farelly, *The Disciples in the Fourth Gospel* (WUNT, II/290: Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

70 Michael W. Martin, *Judas and the Rhetoric of Comparison in the Fourth Gospel* (NTM, 25; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010).

71 See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospel as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

72 See his argument in ibid., pp. 358–83.

as eyewitness testimony would suggest that specific Gospel characters reflect a historical individuality rather than a carefully crafted narrative creation. For these reasons, and because Bauckham's argument has proven influential among a segment of scholars, it needs to be discussed here.

Bauckham's work on eyewitness testimony in the Gospels is characteristically brilliant, but his thesis has proven to be problematic. He insists that reliance on eyewitnesses played a determining role in securing reliable Jesus tradition in the first decades of the early Church. Narrative-critical approaches to the Gospels of the NT stand on the shoulders of the substantive contributions of source, form and redaction criticisms. Thus, it is commonly affirmed that the canonical Gospels developed over time as part of a lengthy process of compiling written and oral material (source and form criticism), editorial activity (redaction criticism), and creative shaping of the received stories (narrative criticism). This process results in a set of theologically stylized narratives with historical roots; these narratives reflect sophisticated storytelling, internal unity, and a theology unique to the individual account. If, as Bauckham contends, eyewitnesses are responsible for the content of the Gospels, this would rob the individual evangelists of the creativity that seems to be a characteristic element of each canonical account of Jesus. For example, in the Gospel of John, characters consistently misunderstand the mission and message of Jesus. Whereas this is a component elsewhere in the Synoptic tradition, it is a driving motif in Fourth Gospel characterization. From a narrative-critical standpoint, this appears to be a fairly obvious literary theme, woven into the narrative as part of the evangelist's intentional theological presentation. Against this backdrop, Bauckham's theory would suggest that such an obvious element of literary design derives from the life and vocation of the historical Jesus, rather than from the final stage of the Gospel's composition. A great deal more could be said about Bauckham's interesting work, but space limitations preclude such a discussion. However, in several of the essays that follow, Bauckham's theory will be engaged from sympathetic and disagreeing points of view.

V. Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John (2013)

Our survey brings us to the contributions of the present volume. The essays in this volume seek to articulate theories of character, provide interaction with and critique of contemporary views, and offer fresh analyses of Johannine characters. The book is divided into two sections. The first section is methodological and explores various theories about characterization and models for reading character. The second section is exegetical and consists of character studies from diverse perspectives within a narrative-critical framework.

In Chapter 1, James Resseguie provides an elegant primer on a narrative-critical approach to characters and characterization showing how rhetoric, point of view, setting, and master-plot contribute to our interpretation of

characters in the Fourth Gospel. In Chapter 2, R. Alan Culpepper reflects upon the surge of interest in Johannine characterization and uses recent research as a launching point to discuss how characters impact the thematic development and rhetorical plan of the Gospel. In Chapter 3, Cornelis Bennema follows up on his recent work on methodology by proposing what he calls, 'a comprehensive, non-reductionist theory of character' as it applies to the Gospel of John. Chapter 4 features a discussion of characters, eyewitnesses and current psychological research. In 2010, Judith Redman published a critique of Richard Bauckham's eyewitness thesis that was set in the context of contemporary psychological research on eyewitness testimony.[73] In her essay for this book, Redman returns to Bauckham's theory using contemporary research on eyewitness testimony, this time set within the framework of a narrative hermeneutic. In Chapter 5, Raymond F. Collins takes a closer look at the roles comparison and contrast play in several character groups and how this contributes to the rhetorical scheme of the narrative. In Chapter 6, Susan Hylen returns to the theme of ambiguity and shows how three elements – historical context, the implied reader and the nature of faith – impact on our reading of John's characters. In the final chapter of the first section, I discuss the Prologue (1.1-18) as a reader-elevating device that places the reader in a position of privilege; this provides the reader with a greater awareness of and appreciation for the role of misunderstanding in the Gospel story and is a key component of the Gospel's approach to characterization.

Stan Harstine begins the second section of this volume with a study of God as a character in the Fourth Gospel from a rhetorical perspective. In Chapter 9, Sherri Brown examines John the Baptist against the backdrop of the Prologue with specific emphasis on the Baptist's role as witness. In Chapter 10, Craig Koester uses the concept of 'theological complexity' to explore Nicodemus' role as a figure that provides readers with glimpses of how the revelatory work of God is done in the world. Turning to the Samaritan woman in Chapter 11, Mary Coloe examines her narrative and theological significance, and highlights her role as a vehicle of the evangelist's ideological point of view. In Chapter 12, Dorothy Lee surveys the Lukan and Johannine portraits of Martha and Mary as understood in history, sacred literature and art. Drawing on his previous work on anonymity and discipleship, David Beck looks at the Beloved Disciple's relationship to the related themes of belief and witness in John. In the book's final chapter, Cornelis Bennema looks at Pilate from a historically informed narrative approach. Emphasizing Pilate's response to Jesus and his impact on the development of the Gospel's plot, he concludes that the common portrait of the Johannine Pilate as weak and vacillating is incorrect.

Taken together, these chapters combine substantive insights on method and individual characters from leading interpreters of the Fourth Gospel. These reflections are meant to provide a comprehensive interaction with

73 Judith C. S. Redman, 'How Accurate are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research', *JBL* 129 (2010), pp. 177–97.

contemporary models of approaching character in a way that will influence the direction of future conversations of Johannine characters and characterization.