7
Characterization

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Understanding John's characters and the ways the Fourth Gospel employs characterization is crucial to appreciating both its story and Christology.[1] Studies of Johannine characterization have proliferated in recent years, and the result is that much helpful light has been shed on a previously overlooked topic.[2] This chapter is devoted to helping the reader come to terms with the function and significance of Johannine characters other than Jesus. Since Jesus is the protagonist of the story, we are given access to a tremendous amount of information about his background and identity (1:1–18), and we are occasionally told what he thinks, how he feels, and what his intentions are for a given action. By contrast, we learn about most other characters in the Fourth Gospel by observing what they say and do. While it is true that Jesus is the only character to be substantially developed

1. Several paragraphs in this chapter have been adapted from Christopher W. Skinner, "Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization: Reading John's Characters through the Lens of the Prologue," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner, LNTS 461 (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 111–27; Skinner, *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict? Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question*, PTMS 115 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009), 19–41.

2. See, most recently, Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmerman, eds., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); Susan E. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009). For a detailed overview of the recent history of this discussion, see my chapter, "Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John: Reflections on the *Status Quaestionis*," in Skinner, *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, xvii–xxxii.

in the narrative, there is much to be gained from an analysis of the other figures in the story world of the Fourth Gospel. It is also worth noting that even though Jesus is the dominant figure in the narrative, John's Gospel is the only one of the four canonical accounts to give extended space to single characters, such as Peter, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Thomas, and the Beloved Disciple.

Few elements of a story can capture our imagination and help us see the world around us like characters can. Anyone who has done much reading knows that character development—especially as it relates to a character's inner life—is an important element in much contemporary writing. The construction of personal identity is of paramount importance to modern individuals and therefore plays a prominent role both in the modern novel and the short story, the standards by which we judge contemporary literature in the Western world. When we encounter characters in contemporary literature, we are often treated to psychological profiles as figures move toward and, in some cases, away from moments of redemption. As familiar as this scenario is to readers of modern literature, this is not how characters typically functioned in ancient literature. Therefore, when approaching the New Testament narratives, we must be careful to situate characters within the thought worlds that gave rise to them. Against that backdrop, the remainder of this chapter will unfold along three lines: first, we will examine how characters functioned in ancient literature; second, we will look at the categories of characterization that have developed within contemporary literary studies; and finally, we will turn to a discussion of how the previous two models help us understand the specific characters and patterns of characterization in the Fourth Gospel.

Characterization in Ancient Literature

In the narrative literature of the Greco-Roman world, action was generally considered to be the most important element in any dramatic presentation. Aristotle (385–322 BCE), in particular, understood the function of characters in tragedy in this way, noting that while it was possible to have a tragedy without a character it was not possible to have a tragedy without an action.[3] At least two practical implications arise from this approach

3. Aristotle's description of how action and character function is spelled out explicitly in *Poet.* 1449b21–1450b20. See also Seymour Chatman's helpful treatment of Aristotle's approach vis-à-vis contemporary Western storytelling in *Story and Dis-*

to character construction. First, the figure performing a given action is necessarily secondary to the action being performed. Second, when the interests of character are subjugated to the action(s) of a story, characters tend to become nearly invisible and seemingly superfluous. Consequently, characters in ancient writing were often reduced to the role of faceless, formless vehicles that existed primarily to advance the action of the story. By and large, the narrative was less concerned about the inner machinations of a character's thought life and more focused on the character's spatial and situational settings and ultimate purpose. However, this only tells part of the story. There is undoubtedly a greater degree of development within ancient Greek (and Greco-Roman) literature than Aristotle's categories allow for, and while we should not paint centuries of narrative literature with such a broad brush, it is probably safe to say that many characters in the New Testament narratives function in a manner similar to that envisioned by Aristotle.[4]

When we shine a light upon characters in the Fourth Gospel, we see that, while some are developed in greater detail than others, in general most figures exist to serve the narrator's characterization agenda, which is to have John's characters clarify the gospel's exalted Christology. These characters appear briefly in the story, allowing little room for substantial formation or development; their raison d'etre is to confirm, deny, or question something about Jesus that will allow the literary audience to advance in its understanding of Jesus's message, mission, and identity. We see this trend even from the outset of the story, where selected characters appear primarily to confess something about Jesus in a way that is either consistent with or different from what has been revealed in the Prologue.[5] These figures appear and disappear just as quickly as part of

course: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 108–27.

4. Cornelis Bennema has provided a lengthy discussion of the ways in which Greco-Roman characters differed from the simplistic formulation offered by Aristotle. See "A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature," *BibInt* 17 (2009): 375–421. It is important also to recognize that we must separate narrative and its characters from other ancient literature specifically focusing on characters (e.g., Plutarch's *Lives*).

5. E.g., John the Baptist (1:26–36), Andrew (1:41), Philip (1:45), and Nathanael (1:49). For more on my own approach to reading the entire gospel, including characters, through the lens of the Prologue, see my chapter, "Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization," 111–27.

the progressive unfolding of the narrative. Though the narrator reports what these characters say and what they appear to know, they ultimately have little importance beyond their initial appearance. In what follows, we will discuss the significance of this understanding of characterization in greater detail.

Discussions of Character in Modern Literary Studies

Unlike the conclusions arising from Aristotle's treatment of character, modern literary studies assume a stronger and more intricate relationship between action and character.[6] This gap is one of the obstacles we face when attempting to apply modern literary theory to an ancient text like the Gospel of John. We must be careful to treat the gospel as a first-century text with its own form and genre expectations without importing too many modern assumptions about how narratives are supposed to work. As always, there is need for a delicate balance between the demands of an ancient text and the assumptions of modern critical methods applied to that text.

While important work was being done on the interpretation of Johannine characters prior to the publication of R. Alan Culpepper's groundbreaking work, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, there is little doubt that contemporary character studies within Fourth Gospel research are an outgrowth of narrative criticism as it was originally articulated in *Anatomy*.[7] The book advanced the idea that, despite questions about sources and redactional layers, the Gospel of John was a complete and autonomous narrative that was worthy of being studied in its final form and on its own terms.[8] While today this insight seems rather banal and possibly even

6. For a detailed discussion of issues covered cursorily by this section, see Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmerman, "An Introduction to Character and Characterization in John and Related New Testament Literature," in Hunt, Tolmie, and Zimmerman, *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, 1–33.

7. R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983).

8. 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

self-evident, at the time it was a radical departure from the *status quo*. The chapter on characters in *Anatomy* was the second longest in the book, and Culpepper's analysis remained fairly close to the predominant discussions that were taking place in literary circles at that time. Of particular importance to his treatment of Johannine characters were categories set forth in Raymond Collins's two foundational articles on "representative figures" in John,[9] along with insights from the works of Seymour Chatman, E. M. Forster, and W. J. Harvey—literary critics who were concerned with the intricacies of Western, secular, and predominantly modern, literature.[10] Using the work of these three scholars, Culpepper raised questions about (1) how, if at all, characters in literature, including biblical narrative, correspond to reality; (2) how characters should be classified; and (3) how different types of characters function in different types of literature.

Seymour Chatman

Chatman's work raised the larger question of whether or not characters correspond to reality in any meaningful sense. On one side of this debate is the assertion that characters "acquire an independence from the plot in which they occur … and can be discussed apart from their literary contexts."[11] This has been variously known as the realist or mimetic position. On the other side of the spectrum is the purist or functional position, which rejects the idea that characters can be extracted from their literary contexts or viewed in hypothetical, nonliterary situations.

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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 *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature*, ed. Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore, RBS 55 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008], 1).

9. The articles first appeared as Raymond F. Collins, "The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel, Part I," *DRev* 94 (1976): 26–46; Collins, "The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel, Part II," *DRev* 94 (1976): 118–32 (reprinted together as "Representative Figures," in *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* [Leuven: Peeters; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 1–45).

10. For Chatman's work, see n. 3 above; E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 43–84; W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965), 52–73.

11. Fred W. Burnett, "Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels," *Semeia* 63 (1993): 4.

The debate over realist and purist approaches to defining character has been an important area of discussion among literary critics over the past few decades. Using the realist approach, scholars extract characters from their narrative worlds and treat them as real people in hypothetical situations in the real world. This approach is primarily associated with the Romantic writers of the nineteenth century and finds fewer advocates today, especially among those working with the New Testament narratives. As an example, the realist approach might take Shakespeare's character Hamlet, extract him from his literary setting, and place him hypothetically into a modern setting, all with the intent of asking, "How might Hamlet respond in such-and-such a situation?" Hamlet's psychological profile as revealed in the Shakespearean tragedy would be used to treat him as an autonomous individual in the twenty-first century. This approach would thus seek to analyze the character in question on the basis of what has been revealed in his or her original literary setting.

On the other end of the debate is the purist approach, which rejects the idea that characters can be taken out of their literary contexts or viewed in hypothetical, nonliterary situations as autonomous individuals. Advocates of this view would argue that Hamlet is necessarily defined by literary parameters associated with his own story like events, time period, characters, and so forth. Thus, to remove him from his literary setting would be to create an entirely new character.

The purist view is, at its most basic level, derived from Aristotle's view of character discussed above. 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. Here, Culpepper contributes a helpful point to this discussion:

> We must face the question of the legitimacy of treating the people described in a historical writing as characters.… Even if one is disposed to see real, historical persons behind every character in John and actual events in every episode, the question of how the author chose to portray the person still arises.[12]

In that same vein, Robert Scholes provides a necessary safeguard to overemphasizing the historicity of a given character in any narrative: "The

12. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 105.

greatest mistake we can make in dealing with characters in fiction is to insist on their 'reality.' No character in a book is a real person. Not even if he is in a history book and his name is Ulysses S. Grant."[13] So, as these views are articulated, we are presently at an impasse. How shall we proceed? Do we abandon both approaches? For our purposes here, I propose that the answer is not to reject both views but rather to take the best of both and create a *via media*. This middle ground should see a given character's correspondence to reality and balance that with an understanding that each character is unique to, and ultimately a product of, his or her literary environment.[14] This means that no character can be understood as a "real" individual apart from his or her narrative framework but that (1) each is understood to possess a certain level of autonomy within the context of the narrative; and (2) every character reflects some correspondence to reality, even if he or she is not understood to be real. If we approach characterization in this way, we will see that the characters of the Fourth Gospel create sympathy among the readers as they are continually pushed toward a decision about the identity of Jesus.

E. M. Forster

Forster is perhaps best known, at least in the conversations between those working with New Testament narratives, for his hard-and-fast distinction between so-called round characters—those characters who display a host of potentially conflicting traits—and flat characters, who are predictable and largely one-dimensional. In his classic work *Aspects of the Novel*, Forster asks and then attempts to answer whether characters should be viewed as human beings, historical persons, or something else altogether.[15] Prefiguring the positions of the purist camp, Forster concludes that

13. Robert Scholes, *Elements of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 117.

14. Numerous recent studies of characterization have tackled the realist/purist debate only to arrive at a *via media* in recognition of the gospels' distinctive genre and other cultural considerations; see, for example, the fine discussion of these issues in 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), 3–19; see also Skinner, *John and Thomas*, 19–41.

15. "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—

characters should not be extracted from the narrative and given unconditional autonomy.[16] However, his deeper concern in posing the question is to understand how characters function with respect to the other elements of the narrative. This is the context in which he sets forth his well-known distinction between round and flat characters.[17]

While Forster's categories have proven helpful, many literary critics have found his dichotomy between round and flat characters problematic in that it too rigidly compartmentalizes characters that seem to exist on a larger literary spectrum. For instance, seemingly flat characters can express genuine insights and momentarily be transformed into characters with multiple rounded edges.[18] In the Fourth Gospel, this is particularly true of a character like Nicodemus, who early in the narrative displays an inability to comprehend Jesus's message and mission (3:1–15), then moves to a position of veiled sympathy with Jesus (7:48–52), and in his final appearance seems to be a follower of the crucified Jesus (19:38–42). His seemingly flat characteristic of misperception is rounded by the narrator to indicate not just a new trait (belief), but rather a genuine, thoroughly Johannine transformation. In this case and others, strict adherence to the categories of round and flat fail to recognize the complexity in many of the minor characters found in New Testament narratives.[19]

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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*, 71).

16. Ibid., 100.

17. Ibid., 103–25.

18. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan 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 comic or ironic effect, as when a character clings to old habits in a situation which renders them inadequate" (*Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd ed. [New York: Routledge, 2002], 61).

19. In recent years, a number of helpful publications have appeared that focus on the role of minor characters in the canonical gospels. See, for instance, Joel F. Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel*, JSNTSup 102 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994); Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The Major Importance of Minor Characters in Mark," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, ed. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight, JSNTSup 109 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 58–86; and Colleen M. Conway, "Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel," *BibInt* 10 (2002): 324–41.

W. J. Harvey

Harvey classified characters into numerous groups, including protagonists, intermediate characters (for example, cards and *ficelles*), and background characters. Harvey's categories—particularly protagonist and *ficelle*—fit nicely with Culpepper's classification of Johannine characters. Using Harvey's categories, Culpepper argued that Jesus is the clear protagonist of the story, while most of the other characters in the narrative function as *ficelles*—characters that are easily recognizable and often carry symbolic value. In an oft-cited article in which he draws upon the work of Adele Berlin, Fred Burnett 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."[20] 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.[21]

Characterization in the Gospel of John

While the reading experience of each real reader will invariably be different, the hypothetical implied reader (or implied audience) consistently perceives the message of the implied author correctly. In a manner of speaking, the implied reader "gets it right" every time.[22] A necessary first

20. Burnett, "Characterization and Reader Construction," 19 (emphasis added). See also Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 23–42.

21. Burnett's continuum is a construct upon which Cornelis Bennema relies heavily in his work on this subject; see Bennema, "Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel," and Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character in the Gospel of John," in Skinner, *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, 36–58.

22. Terminology such as *implied audience*, *implied author*, *narrator*, and *real reader* is well known among those working with narrative-critical research. Within secular literary criticism, see the pioneering work of Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and Wolfgang Iser, *The*

step in understanding how John uses characterization is the observation that the implied audience and the narrator form an "inside group" that has privileged knowledge about Jesus. By contrast, the characters in the story are part of an "outside group" that is constantly struggling to come to terms with Jesus's identity and mission. This insider/outsider dichotomy comes to the fore at the very beginning of the narrative through the Prologue (John 1:1–18). The Prologue describes the Word (*logos*) as existing with God with a uniquely divine status before time began (vv. 1–2). He is the agent of all creation (v. 3), the light of humanity that enlightens those in the world (vv. 4, 9), and the one with authority to both appoint God's children (v. 12) and display God's glory (v. 14). He exists in intimate union with the Father (v. 18b) and reveals the Father to humanity (v. 18c). This detailed description of Jesus lays an important foundation for our understanding of how John uses characterization; it provides the implied audience with information necessary first, to identify Jesus and second, to evaluate every character's response to him. The Prologue is thus the interpretive grid through which the implied audience can understand the gospel's main purpose, which is to engender belief in those who hear the story (see 20:31).[23] John quite often provides a dualistic presentation of the cosmos. There are the things above and the things below, light and dark, truth and falsehood. Within that dualistic framework there are also those who accept Jesus and those who reject him; there is no in-between. Thus this dualistic dynamic is also reflected in how John uses characterization.

The narrator is omniscient, knowing whom Jesus loves (11:5; 13:1–3, 23; 19:26; 20:2), what Jesus perceives (6:6, 15, 61, 64; 13:1; 19:28), and

Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). For a primer on the use of these and other important terms as applied to the New Testament narratives, see Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?" in Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 1–40.

23. In my recent book, *Reading John* (Cascade Companions [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015], 8–31), I liken the reader's experience with the Prologue to a viewer's experience with the TV show *Columbo*. Unlike most detective shows, in which the viewing audience has the same information as the characters in the TV drama, the viewer of *Columbo* has access to privileged information in the very first scene of each episode that others in the show do not know about. Thus, the Johannine Prologue and the first scene of each episode of *Columbo* serve as "audience-elevating devices" that allow for a more informed interpretation of the events that unfold as the story moves forward.

when Jesus is troubled (11:33, 38; 13:1).[24] The narrator also provides information about the beliefs (2:11, 22; 20:8), suppositions (13:19; 20:15), and memories of the disciples (2:22; 12:16; 13:28; 19:35), guiding the reader skillfully through a maze of reported activities, interactions, and conversations. Unlike the narrator, the reader is informed but not omniscient; the reader has access to much of this privileged information but continues to learn throughout the story. By contrast, the characters of the gospel do not have access to this inside view. This literary feature places readers in a position to evaluate every character's response to and interaction with Jesus. Now that we have examined the dynamics that exist between John's narrator and implied audience, it remains to look at specific characters and character dynamics within the gospel.

John's Presentation of Named and Anonymous Characters

In his analysis of anonymity in the Gospel of John, William Watty notes the remarkable precision displayed by the narrator in identifying characters by name, birthplace, and parentage.[25] He also recognizes the way in which the evangelist meticulously identifies places, defines Semitic terms, and possesses knowledge of events beyond the scope of any character in the narrative. Against that backdrop, it is compelling to note those places where concern for detail is conspicuous by its absence, particularly when it comes to the anonymous but literarily significant characters in the narrative.

Very often in narrative literature anonymous characters serve as simple agents who help guide the action of the story. We often see this phenomenon in the Synoptic Gospels where the absence of a name is often an indicator of unimportance. Noting this general trend, David Beck comments that, "some Fourth Gospel anonymous characters invert this tendency [in the Synoptics], occupy more textual space, and demonstrate narrative significance by their faith response to Jesus's word, a response

24. It is common for narrative critics—specifically those working with biblical literature—to affirm the narrator's omniscience. For a discussion that attempts to nuance this common assertion, see Jonathan Culler, "Omniscience," *Narrative* 12 (2004): 22–34.

25. William Watty, "The Significance of Anonymity in the Fourth Gospel," *ExpTim* 90 (1979): 209–12.

of witness to the efficacy of his word."[26] Those who might otherwise be regarded as unimportant seemingly become models of Johannine faith that is greater than those who are named directly. The mother of Jesus is a poignant example of this. Though she is called Mary in the Synoptic Gospels, she is never directly named in John. Few would argue, however, that her role is an insignificant one. In fact, some have identified the mother of Jesus as the first true example of Johannine faith within the story.[27] Though anonymous, she ultimately becomes paradigmatic for belief. Further, her simple identification as "woman" (2:4; 19:26) indicates a great deal about how John intends to present her to the literary audience.[28] Much discussion has been generated over this issue in the recent commentary tradition. While some modern readers may consider "woman" a strange and potentially disrespectful appellation, this is probably an example of how anonymity works within the specific approach to characterization that is operative in John. From an analysis of John's nameless figures, we see that the use of anonymity is an important part of the Fourth Gospel's approach to characterization.

Those interested in exploring this narrative dynamic in greater detail need only look more closely at the Samaritan woman (4:4–42) who becomes the first evangelist within the story; the royal official (4:46–54) who believes on the basis of Jesus's word rather than his works—a key theme in the gospel; the sick man at the pool of Bethesda (5:15); the young man born blind (9:1–34); and the Beloved Disciple (13:21–30; 18:15–18; 19:26–27; 21:7, 20), the one character who (I will argue) serves as the paradigmatic example of what it means to follow Jesus.

A quite common opinion expressed by literary critics is that in ancient literature a name is important for a character to have any real value within a given story. In other words, characters must necessarily have a *proper name* in order to avoid being a nameless, faceless, agent.[29] This is an

26. David R. Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel*, BibInt 27 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 2.

27. See Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1–4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 80–92; Collins, "Representative Figures," 30–33.

28. On this, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 2 vols., AB 29–29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966–1970), 1:99, 107–9.

29. On this assertion as it relates to characters in biblical narratives, see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 331. For a more robust consideration of anonymity in biblical narrative, see Adele Reinhartz,"*Why Ask My*

important claim to consider when approaching the characters of John vis-à-vis the Synoptic Gospels. On one hand, this assertion proves to be true almost without exception in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts: characters with names are examples of greater significance in the story, while anonymous characters act as agents, serving primarily, or almost solely, to advance the action of the plot. However, this is not at all the case in the Fourth Gospel, where anonymous characters represent some of the most significant figures and actions in the story. By contrast, the Fourth Gospel also introduces us to named characters who, far from becoming key figures in the narrative, serve as faceless agents who exist to guide the plot; this is particularly true of a figure like Malchus, the servant of the high priest (19:10). Within John's story-world, named characters often, if not characteristically, represent misunderstanding of or opposition to Jesus.[30] Readers interested in how John uses characterization must pay close attention to the presence or absence of a proper name and the various character contrasts that emerge.

John's Presentation of Misunderstanding Characters

Misunderstanding is a major motif in the Fourth Gospel, though little has been written on the connection between misunderstanding and character development.[31] Many characters are unable to understand Jesus, and thus incomprehension is one of the most important things we should pay attention to when it comes to John's characters. Apart from the Beloved

Name?": Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

30. Another interesting contrast within John's approach to characterization is the elevation of women over men as positive models with more praiseworthy characteristics and responses to Jesus. There is not space here for a full exegetical consideration of each figure, but there can be little doubt that the mother of Jesus (2:1–12), the Samaritan woman (4:4–42), Mary of Bethany (11:1–2, 28–32; 12:1–11), her sister Martha (11:20–27), and Mary Magdalene (19:25; 20:11–18) each hold special significance in the wider story. By and large, female characters—especially in their lack of association with official societal structures—appear in a more positive light throughout the gospel. On this, see Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization*, SBLDS 167 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

31. This has been a major concern in my own writing on this subject; see Skinner, *John and Thomas*, 227–31; "Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization," 111–27; *Reading John*, 96–121.

Disciple (and possibly John the Baptist),[32] no character fully grasps what the audience has learned from the Prologue. Armed with this information, the audience is able to evaluate the different character responses to Jesus—all of which fail in one way or another—and further grants the Johannine Jesus narrative space to clarify elements of his message, mission, and identity.[33] In a very real sense, the Prologue fashions the implied audience by raising expectations and explaining things heretofore unknown. The narrator shapes the implied audience both by providing claims about Jesus that must be tested and by drawing the audience more deeply into the unfolding story of Jesus. One major way in which the audience tests the truthfulness of this information is by observing character interactions, specifically interactions between Jesus and uncomprehending characters.

As the story moves forward, characters appear to understand or misunderstand Jesus to the degree that they grasp ideas earlier unveiled in the Prologue. Since no character other than the Beloved Disciple (see the discussion below) fully grasps this information, each expresses some degree of misunderstanding. The narrator then uses Jesus's words to clarify the fuller meaning of these themes. Readers soon discover that numerous character interactions in the gospel follow a predictable pattern:

(1) Jesus speaks or acts in the presence of another character. This activity usually addresses some element of Jesus's mission.
(2) The character in question misperceives some element of Jesus's words or actions. This misunderstanding requires either correction or further instruction.

32. It is commonplace within the commentary tradition to regard John the Baptist as a reliable witness to Jesus. In John 1:6, the narrator describes him as "sent from God," a description that only applies to John and Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. However, even though John is reliable, his knowledge of Jesus is incomplete, unlike the Beloved Disciple. For more on this, see my article "'Son of God' or 'God's Chosen One'? (John 1:34): A Narrative-Critical Solution to a Text-Critical Problem," *BBR* 25 (2015): 341–58.

33. There are levels of misunderstanding in the gospel. Clearly, a character like Nicodemus represents a much greater degree of incomprehension than the Samaritan woman, who subsequently goes on to evangelize her entire village. Nevertheless, the Samaritan woman and other characters that are ultimately characterized in a favorable way display elements of misunderstanding that allow Jesus to clarify something about his message, mission, identity, origins, etc.

(3) Jesus speaks again, this time in a way that is intended to clarify what has been misunderstood.
(4) In each instance, one or more themes from the Prologue are raised, revealing the character's misunderstanding, exposing the reader's knowledge once again, and ultimately clarifying the truth about Jesus.

It is not a problem for the implied audience that characters have not been exposed to the information revealed in the Prologue. This is part of the narrator's rhetorical strategy. These misunderstandings heighten the audience's awareness and understanding of Jesus's origins, mission, and identity. The narrator then uses the discourses of Jesus to shed light on the fuller meaning of these misunderstood themes and accomplishes this in contexts where Jesus is instructing or correcting a given character.

Throughout the story, the audience is forced to return to the insider information provided by the Prologue, which allows them to evaluate character responses to Jesus along with other elements of the narrative. These misunderstanding characters advance the plot by causing the audience to look back at what has been revealed, which in turn points forward to the cumulative effect of the story to that point. In these instances of incomprehension, the audience is reminded of the information already given about Jesus and also how each character in the story has responded to Jesus thus far. This constant back-and-forth movement helps contribute to the narrator's desired effect by keeping the audience aware of what has transpired and building anticipation for what will take place as the story moves toward its climax. Keeping this narrative feature in mind, the audience sees how John's uncomprehending characters advance the action of the story also while emphasizing the gospel's Christology.

Some Examples of Character Misunderstanding in the Gospel of John

2:19–22: Jesus tells the crowds, "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days." They take him literally, but he is referring to the "temple of his body."
3:3–4: Nicodemus mistakenly thinks that Jesus is talking about a literal second birth, but he is actually speaking about being born "from above."
4:10–15: Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman about "living water" but he is figuratively referring to "water that imparts life."

She mistakenly believes he is talking about "running water" and asks her to provide this for her.
4:31–38: Jesus tells his disciples, "I have food that you do not know about." He is speaking figuratively of fulfilling the Father's will, but they believe he is talking about food.
6:43–56: Jesus tells the crowds that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood, which they mistakenly take as a reference to cannibalism. However, he is referring, figuratively, to the practice John's original audience had come to know as the Eucharist.
11:4–16: When discussing Jesus's upcoming trip into Judea, Thomas tells the other disciples, "Let us go also that we may die with him," but he fails to realize that Jesus's trip to Judea is about life rather than death. Jesus intends to raise Lazarus from the dead.

John's Presentation of the Beloved Disciple

The figure known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" appears in five scenes in the Gospel of John (John 13:21–30; 18:15–18; 19:26–27; 20:2–10; 21:7 with 21:20), though some also regard the unnamed disciple in John 1:35–39 as the Beloved Disciple. In these scenes the Beloved Disciple often stands in contrast to Simon Peter, who is characterized less positively. In each instance the Beloved Disciple responds to Jesus in a way that the narrator considers praiseworthy, while Peter expresses confusion, doubt, and misunderstanding before he denies that he knows Jesus. As a player in the Johannine drama, the Beloved Disciple gets everything right: twice he is found in a location that indicates his loyalty to Jesus (John 18:15–18; 19:26–27); he responds appropriately by believing at the empty tomb, even when he does not understand (John 20:3–8); he also recognizes the risen Jesus from afar while the other disciples do not (John 21:7). In what is probably the most important comment about the Beloved Disciple, the narrator depicts him as "leaning back on the chest of Jesus" (*en tō kolpō tou Iēsou*, John 13:23 [my translation])—an English rendering of the nearly identical Greek phrase used to describe the relationship between Jesus and the Father, "close to the Father's heart" (*eis ton kolpon tou patrou*, John 1:18 [my translation]). Each of these depictions reinforces the idea that the Beloved Disciple should be seen as an ideal follower of Jesus—one with whom any faithful reader can and should identify.

In his first four appearances, the Beloved Disciple is presented in a substantially positive way. He is superior in his displays of love and insight

and in his proper responses to both the living and the resurrected Jesus. Out of all the disciples, he stands alone in a number of respects. He alone is privileged to lie at Jesus's side (13:23). He alone is able to ask Jesus directly about the betrayer at dinner (13:25). He alone appears at the foot of the cross (19:25–27). He alone is said to believe in the resurrected Jesus (20:8–9).

In each of these scenes, the Beloved Disciple contrasts with Peter who has failed to understand Jesus's message and mission (13:6–11, 24, 36–38), resisted Jesus's return to the Father (18:10–11), and denied Jesus three times (18:17, 25–27). However, the scene in 20:2–10 provides a truly compelling moment in the presentation of Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Both disciples have run to the tomb (vv. 3–4). Both have witnessed the same reality—Jesus's linens are there but he is no longer in the tomb (vv. 5–8). Neither disciple understands the Scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead (v. 9).[34] But, without either the benefit of sight or understanding, the Beloved Disciple alone is said to believe (v. 8).

Thus, it is clear that the story is meant to evoke in the implied audience, if not the real audience, sympathy for the Beloved Disciple while using Peter as a foil. Within the story the Beloved Disciple functions as the disciple *par excellence*. The various characters in the gospel approach Jesus with different levels of understanding, but no one—outside of the Beloved Disciple—approaches him with a complete understanding of the truths that have been revealed to the audience. In light of his overall depiction in the narrative, we can discern a specific reason for the anonymity of the Beloved Disciple. Any reader who wishes to follow Jesus as prescribed by the Fourth Gospel can become a "beloved disciple" by following his lead. The Beloved Disciple beckons the reader: "Follow Jesus as I have followed him, and you too can become a disciple whom Jesus loves."

Conclusion

In order to understand how John uses characterization, we must begin with the exposition of Jesus's identity and mission as it appears in the Pro-

34. For further reflections on this important verse, see Francis J. Moloney, "'For as Yet They Did Not Know the Scripture' (John 20:9): A Study in Narrative Time," *ITQ* 79 (2014): 97–111, and, in response, Brendan Byrne, "A Step Too Far: A Critique of Francis Moloney's Understanding of 'the Scripture' in John 20:9," *ITQ* 80 (2015): 149–56.

logue and continues to be developed throughout the story. This information provides the audience access to everything it needs to enter into the story world in a meaningful way. The audience must also remain aware that the characters in the story do not have access to the same privileged information that has been revealed to them. The intentional connection between the narrator and the audience, who together form an "inside group," thus stands in contrast to the various characters, who constitute an "outside group" shrouded in darkness, ambiguity, and misunderstanding.

John's characters also help to clarify the presentation of several interwoven theological themes in the gospel. The identity of Jesus is laid out in the Prologue and a proper or improper understanding of Jesus's identity has implications for the audience's view of belief, Christology, and the Johannine theology of the cross. These related themes emerge every time a character fails to understand Jesus. The implied audience (which already knows the story of Jesus but is being exposed to the Johannine version for the first time) understands that Jesus is "from above" and that he is the revealer of the Father. An understanding of Jesus's identity informs the gospel's christological presentation. An understanding of John's Christology further clarifies Jesus's mission toward the cross, which in turn clarifies the nature of authentic Johannine belief. Whether under the surface or at the forefront, these themes are present in every encounter the audience has with a character in the Fourth Gospel. The narrative provides the audience with the knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the revealer of the Father who has come from above, to be glorified on the cross and at the tomb. For one to believe in Jesus, an understanding of these truths must be present. By using the Prologue in concert with various characters, the narrator consistently illustrates improper belief in Jesus and beckons the audience to respond in belief (see 20:31) from a perspective informed by knowledge of Jesus's origins and identity.