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THE SYMBOLIC NARRATIVES OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

The Interplay of Form and Meaning

DOROTHY A. LEE

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JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
SUPPLEMENT SERIES
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Sheffield

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Journal for the Study of the New Testament
Supplement Series 95

For
Edwin and Barbara Lee

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Published by JSOT Press
JSOT Press is an imprint of
Sheffield Academic Press Ltd
343 Fulwood Road
Sheffield S10 3BP
England

Typeset by Sheffield Academic Press

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

EISBN 9781850754688

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study of the Fourth Gospel is based on my PhD thesis accepted by the University of Sydney within the Department of Religious Studies in July 1991. Since then I have re-worked the text of the original. I owe special thanks to my supervisor, Brendan Byrne S.J., who, as a scholar and friend, supported and inspired me throughout the project. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my examiner, Francis J. Moloney SDB, for his insightful comments, encouragement and wise advice.

Special thanks are due to a number of colleagues who supported me in various ways over the past nine years of teaching and writing. I mention only a few of these: Christiaan Mostert, Howard Wallace, Colleen O'Reilly, Nigel Watson, Robert Anderson, Maryanne Confoy RSC, and John Honner S.J. To the members of the feminist theological group in Melbourne I owe a special debt: for the liveliness of their faith, their willingness to challenge, and their warm companionship.

Further thanks are due to Glenys Biddle of the Camden Theological Library, Sydney, and Lawrence D. McIntosh of the Joint Theological Library, Melbourne, who were untiring in their assistance and expertise. I am grateful also to Stanley E. Porter for accepting this work for publication.

I owe thanks to my husband, David Pollard, who has shown interest and support in all my work; my daughters Miriam and Irene, whose births during my theological studies enriched my life in ways I would never have imagined; and my parents, Edwin and Barbara Lee, to whom this work is dedicated, who have given me constant encouragement over many years.

D.A.L.
Queen's College, Melbourne
July 1993

ABBREVIATIONS

Commentaries on John's Gospel in the footnotes are cited only by author's surname, volume and page numbers. A separate list of the commentaries, with full bibliographical details, is given in the bibliography.

AAR	American Academy of Religion
AB	Anchor Bible
AnBib	Analecta biblica
AusBR	*Australian Biblical Review*
BAGD	W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich and F.W. Danker, *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament*
BDF	F. Blass, A. Debrunner and R.W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
BEvT	Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie
Bib	*Biblica*
BJRL	*Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
CahRB	Cahiers de la revue biblique
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
ETL	*Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses*
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
FFNT	Foundations and Facets: New Testament
HeyJ	*Heythrop Journal*
IDB	G.A. Buttrick (ed.), *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
Int	*Interpretation*
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
JSNTSup	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament* Supplement Series
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LD	Lectio divina
LSJ	Liddell–Scott–Jones, *Greek–English Lexicon*
MM	J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NovTSup	*Novum Testamentum* Supplements

NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
ResQ	*Restoration Quareerly*
RevExp	*Review and Expositor*
SBLDS	SBL Dissertation Series
SBLSBS	SBL Sources for Biblical Study
SBLSP	SBL Seminar Papers
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SNTSMS	Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TBT	*The Bible Today*
TDNT	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TTod	*Theology Today*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*

INTRODUCTION

The following study examines six long narratives of the Fourth Gospel from a literary critical perspective. These 'symbolic narratives' reveal the complex interplay of form and meaning in the relationship that develops between symbol and narrative. Each narrative is created to unfold a central symbol and the development of the symbol, in turn, draws out the narrative. The parallel unfolding of symbol and narrative takes place in the encounter between Jesus and the leading characters, who struggle to make sense of Jesus and his offer of eternal life. In theological terms, the narratives reveal the way in which material reality becomes symbolic of the divine. The reader is drawn subjectively into the drama and challenged to make the authentic response of faith.

A. *Pattern of the Symbolic Narratives*

I have used the term 'symbolic narrative' in a quite specific and defined sense for these six narratives, not simply as a vague reference to John's overall narrative, but as a technical term for a literary form that is unique to certain parts of the Fourth Gospel.[1] The closest parallel is John Painter's term 'narrative symbol', which he uses in a general way to describe John 9.[2] Painter's concern, however, is

1. The term is used, though in a general, non-specific way, by C.K. Barrett, B. Olsson and S.M. Schneiders: Barrett, p. 436, and Schneiders, 'The Foot Washing (John 13.1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics', *Ex Auditu* 1 (1985), p. 139, use it of the Foot Washing. B. Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel: A Text-Linguistic Analysis of John 2.1-11 and 4.1-42* (Lund: Gleerup, 1974), pp. 114, 250, refers to the Wedding at Cana (2.1-12) as a 'symbolic narrative text'. See also C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 363, on 11.1-53.

2. J. Painter, 'John 9 and the Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel', *JSNT* 28 (1986), p. 42. See also H. Boers, 'Discourse Structure and Macro-structure in the Interpretation of Texts: John 4.1-42 as an Example', in P.J. Achtemeier (ed.), *SBL*

theological rather than literary and he does not enter into discussion of the narrative dynamics. The inversion 'symbolic narrative' is preferable because it stresses the dynamic quality of the texts under discussion within a narrative context.[1] There are six such narratives in the first half of the Gospel:

1. The Story of Nicodemus (3.1-36 [2.23–3.36]).
2. The Story of the Samaritan Woman (4.1-42).
3. The Healing at the Pool (5.1-47).
4. The Feeding of the Five Thousand (6.1-71).
5. The Healing of the Man Born Blind (9.1-41).
6. The Raising of Lazarus (11.1–12.11).

Each of these narratives has its own unique features and belongs within its wider narrative context in the Gospel. Nevertheless, when examined side-by-side, a common narrative structure is discernible which revolves around a central symbol. This distinctive pattern reveals itself in five narrative Stages:

Stage 1: *Foundational Image or 'Sign'*. The narrative begins by establishing an image and/or miraculous event (σημεῖον), such as bread, water, the healing of an individual or feeding of a crowd. It may also include a Jewish feast.

Stage 2: *Misunderstanding*. The central character takes the image and/ or 'sign' in a literal way and assumes mistakenly that it relates to material reality (σάρξ). Furthermore, just as the image and/or 'sign' is misunderstood, so is Jesus who proffers it. He too is (mis)understood on a material level, as merely a provider of material needs.

Stage 3: *Struggle for Understanding*. The ensuing narrative is the struggle of the main character to understand the meaning of the image and/or 'sign' and its giver, involving a dramatic process of understanding through misunderstanding. It takes place in dialogue with

1980 Seminar Papers (SBLSP, 19; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), p. 174, who describes 4.1-42 as 'a myth, a narrative symbol'.

1. It follows that the term 'symbolic narrative' excludes the Wedding at Cana (2.1-12), the Passion and Resurrection Narratives (chs. 18-21) and the Foot Washing (13.1-20). These narratives contain important Johannine symbols, but either do not have a single symbolic focus or are not concerned with the faith development of the leading characters around the central symbol. The Foot Washing has structural similarities to the long narratives of the first half of the Gospel, but, standing at the head of the Farewell Discourse, it finds its meaning within a different narrative context.

Jesus who explicates the meaning in a series of clarifying statements. Stage 3 is usually the longest section of the narrative.

Stage 4: *Attainment or Rejection of Symbolic Understanding.* The struggle for understanding can result in one of two ways (or both): (1) Attainment of Understanding. In the process the main character comes to perceive the image and/or 'sign' as a symbol of eschatological life realisable in the present. Jesus also comes to be perceived in symbolic terms as the one sent from God, the one through whose human σάρξ the divine δόξα is revealed. The movement from a literal or materialistic to a symbolic understanding represents the attainment of faith. (2) Rejection of Symbolic Understanding. Alternatively, the narrative may describe the movement away from faith, in which the symbol is rejected in favour of a materialistic worldview. The images and 'signs' are linked to the religious traditions of Judaism which, for the evangelist, have meaning only in their symbolic relationship with Jesus. These remain on a materialistic level unless reinterpreted from the perspective of Johannine christology. Where Jesus is rejected, it represents the choice of unbelief.

Stage 5: *Confession of Faith or Statement of Rejection.* The narrative concludes with a confession of faith, implying a commitment to discipleship, and/or an explicit statement of rejection of Jesus. Stage 5 is the confirmation and climax of Stage 4.

It may be observed in this pattern that in Stage 1 image and 'sign' are placed on an equivalent level. Of the 'signs' in the first half of the Gospel most are explicitly designated as such within the narrative (see 2.11, 4.54, 6.14, 9.16, 11.47 and 12.18).[1] Other narratives, such as the healing in John 5, betray the characteristics of σημεῖα.[2] The standard view of Johannine 'signs' is that they involve a miraculous happening,[3]

1. These are said traditionally to number seven; see Brown, I, pp. cxlii, 525. Against this, cf. Bultmann, pp. 112-13, and K.H. Rengstorf, 'σημεῖον', *TDNT*, VII, p. 246.

2. For a discussion of the relationship between ἔργον and σημεῖον, see Chapter 4, pp. 95-96.

3. So W. Nicol, *The Semeia in the Fourth Gospel: Tradition and Redaction* (NovTSup, 32; Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 62, who defines σημεῖον as 'an event which is, by its miraculous character, a legitimising sign of the Christ'; also Brown, I, pp. 527-30, and M. de Jonge, 'Signs and Works in the Fourth Gospel', in *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God: Jesus Christ and the Christians in Johannine Perspective* (SBLSBS; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 117-40. For the opposing view that σημεῖον needs to be understood in a broader and not exclusively

and their importance lies in what they reveal christologically: 'the Christological significance proves to be the most important element of the Johannine "signs", the most characteristic of their properties and the heart of their theology.'[1] The 'signs', in other words, are a stimulus to faith for the characters of the narrative. Their function is to lead the implied reader of the Gospel to a faith response. Commentators tend to make a good deal of the importance of the 'signs', particularly in the first half of the Gospel.[2] This kind of emphasis on 'sign', however, can be misleading. 'Signs' primarily reveal the divine δόξα (2.11) which, in the context of John's incarnational perspective (1.14), is an important indication of their true nature. In fact, the most important feature of the Johannine σημεῖα is that they function as symbols.[3] From this it follows that fundamentally they are no different from the images to be found in John's symbolic narratives. Both 'sign' and image need to be understood within the symbolic framework of the text. Like the images of the Gospel, the 'signs' function to reveal and communicate a symbolic level of reality that arises out of, yet also transcends the material world.

The struggle that confronts the characters of the drama is thus to understand 'sign' and image symbolically. Those who fail to see the imagery in metaphorical terms are on the same level as those whose faith is based only on the miraculous. Though 'signs' differ from the images in being miraculous events, the difference is superficial in terms of the narrative and the struggle for faith. The feasts also belong within the same framework: their function is to point symbolically to

miraculous way, cf. Dodd, *Interpretation*, pp. 297, 300-303, who sees the Cleansing of the Temple (2.13-22) as a 'sign', and Schneiders, 'Foot Washing', pp. 137-38, who regards the Foot Washing as 'a sign *par excellence*' (p. 137). See also B. Byrne, 'The Faith of the Beloved Disciple and the Community in John 20', *JSNT* 23 (1985), pp. 85, 88-91, and S.M. Schneiders, 'The Face Veil: A Johannine Sign (John 20.1-10)', *BTB* 13 (1983), pp. 94-97, both of whom who regard the σουδάριον at 20.7 as a 'sign'.

1. Schnackenburg, I, p. 525.
2. See, e.g., Brown, I, pp. cxxxviii-cxliii, pp. 525-32.
3. See S.M. Schneiders, 'History and Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel', in M. de Jonge (ed.), *L'Evangile de Jean: sources, rédaction, théologie* (BETL, 44; Louvain: Louvain University Press, 1976), pp. 371-76 (373), and 'Symbolism and the Sacramental Principle in the Fourth Gospel', in P.-R. Tragan (ed.), *Segni e sacramenti nel Vangelo di Giovanni* (Studia Anselmiana, 66; Rome: Editrice Anselmiana, 1977), pp. 221-35 (223, 227).

a deeper reality. The basic element of symbolic narrative, therefore, is symbol, of which image, 'sign' and feast are manifestations.

B. *Johannine Studies on Narrative and Symbol*

The impetus for undertaking a study such as this arises out of contemporary literary studies of the Fourth Gospel. In particular, an important stream in Johannine studies is concerned with the narrative mechanisms of the text and the way its symbolism develops.[1] The most important in recent years has been Culpepper's narrative study of John's Gospel,[2] in which he gathers together insights from the secular discipline of literary criticism and applies them to the Fourth Gospel. For him, the purpose of the Gospel (20.31) is fulfilled through narrative devices: irony, misunderstanding, symbolism, characterisation and plot. The implied reader is drawn into the narrative world,[3] through shared omniscience and the structure of the plot.[4] More

1. For a thorough review of the literature in this area, see D.A. Lee-Pollard, 'The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning' (unpublished thesis, University of Sydney, 1991), pp. 21-37.

2. R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (FFNT; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). See also Culpepper, 'The Narrator in the Fourth Gospel: Intratextual Relationships', in K.H. Richards (ed.), *SBL 1982 Seminar Papers One Hundred Eighteenth Annual Meeting* (SBLPS, 21; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 81-96; 'Story and History in the Gospels', *RevExp* 81 (1984), pp. 467-78, and 'John', in B.W. Anderson (ed.), *The Books of the Bible. II. The Apocrypha and the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), pp. 209-23. For examples of recent studies of Johannine narrative that stress the necessity of both narrative and historical approaches to the Fourth Gospel, see M.W.G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and M.C. de Boer, 'Narrative Criticism, Historical Criticism, and the Gospel of John', *JSNT* 47 (1992), pp. 35-48.

3. The notion of 'implied reader' in literary critical jargon is an idealised creation of the text to which corresponds the 'implied author', both being distinct from the real author and reader of the Gospel; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 98, 210-12. See also J.L. Staley, *The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* (SBLDS, 82; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 27, who defines the implied author as 'the unifying sense that the reader makes of a narrative, irrespective of how many real authors or editors may lie behind it'.

4. For W. Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 275, a text without a reader remains virtual until the 'convergence of text and

pertinently, Culpepper offers an overview of symbolism in John,[1] tracing the core symbols throughout the narrative.[2] He identifies the issue of symbolism as an area of research,[3] offering guidelines for future undertakings.[4]

The most helpful definition of symbol in relation to John's Gospel comes from the work of Sandra M. Schneiders. She sees symbol as the experience of a transcendent reality which has its source firmly located within material reality.[5] Schneiders notes the distinction between sign (in the everyday, non-Johannine sense) and symbol. Whereas the sign stands for something absent, the symbol brings to expression that which is present.[6] 'The symbol is an epiphany of present reality, not an indication of an absent one.'[7] Johannine symbolism, in this sense, is the Gospel's 'characteristic revelatory mode'.[8] The point relates as much to the literary nature of the Gospel as to its theology: the Johannine Jesus is the artistic 'symbolization of God' on which the narrative of the Gospel depends.[9] Because the symbolic nature of the Gospel is a 'condition of validity for its interpretation', its theological meaning cannot be divorced from its symbolic framework.[10]

reader brings the literary work into existence'. See Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 32-33, and Staley, *Print's First Kiss*, which is a study of the Fourth Gospel from the perspective of reader response criticism (esp. pp. 50-118).

1. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 180-81.
2. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 190-97.
3. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 188-89.
4. In regard to terminology, I have used 'narrator' in the sense defined by Culpepper, whereas 'the evangelist' or 'John' I have used interchangeably of the implied author. Masculine pronouns are used in accordance with the masculine name traditionally given to the Fourth Gospel, though it may bear no relation to the actual author/s of the Gospel. The masculine pronoun is counterbalanced by referring to the 'implied reader' with feminine pronouns.
5. See Introduction, p. 8.
6. Schneiders, 'History and Symbolism', p. 372, and 'Symbolism', p. 223. According to G. Stemberger, *La symbolique du bien et du mal selon saint Jean* (Parole de Dieu; Paris: Editions du Seuih, 1970), p. 14, a symbol is always a sign, but a sign is not necessarily a symbol; for him this parallels the fundamental difference that exists between symbol and allegory.
7. Schneiders, 'Symbolism', p. 224.
8. Schneiders, 'History and Symbolism', p. 376.
9. Schneiders, 'History and Symbolism', p. 373.
10. See also the the work of R. Kieffer and X. Léon-Dufour who have attempted

A similar perspective, uniting theological meaning and narrative form, is found in a number of recent discussions on irony. If anything, these discussions have shed as much light on symbolism as on irony,[1] partly because the claims made for irony are sometimes excessive and misplaced. Gail O'Day, for example, who has perceptive insights into the theological significance of Johannine narrative, sees irony as John's characteristic revelatory mode. It can only take effect as the reader responds to the ironical shape of the narrative and comes to share the vision of the Johannine community.[2] Irony, in O'Day's view, operates simultaneously on two levels in the text that relate theologically to the σάρξ–δόξα paradigm of the Gospel:

> Through his use of irony, the Fourth Evangelist asks the reader to see the real meaning *in* and *through* the expressed meaning, not as independent or removed from it (to use Bultmann's terms, the δόξα [glory] must be seen in the σάρξ [flesh]).[3]

The problem here is that, in theological terms, too much is made to hang on irony;[4] its meaning is stretched to make it function as far

to bring a more integrated perspective to bear on John's use of symbol; see R. Kieffer, *Le monde symbolique de Saint Jean* (Paris: Cerf, 1989) and X. Léon-Dufour, 'Towards a Symbolic Reading of the Fourth Gospel', *NTS* 27 (1981), pp. 439-56. Léon-Dufour ('Symbolic Reading', pp. 440-41) prefers to speak of 'symbolic operation' rather than symbol in the narrative, while Kieffer (*Le monde*, pp. 97-113) relates the images of the Gospel to the 'stage-pictures' (or scenes) of the Gospel and sees the images, scenes and metaphors as working together to create the narrative.

1. For example, G.W. MacRae, 'Theology and Irony in the Fourth Gospel', in R.J. Clifford and MacRae (eds.), *The Word in the World: Essays in Honor of F.L. Moriarity* (Cambridge, MA: Weston College Press, 1973), pp. 83-96; P.D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985); and G.R. O'Day, 'Narrative Mode and Theological Claim: A Study in the Fourth Gospel', *JBL* 105 (1986), pp. 657-68, and *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). See also D.W. Wead, 'Johannine Irony as a Key to the Author-Audience Relationship in John's Gospel', in F.O. Francis (ed.), *Biblical Literature: 1974 Proceedings (AAR Annual Meeting)* (Tallahassee: AAR, 1974), pp. 33-44, and G. Johnston, '*Ecce Homo!* Irony in the Christology of the Fourth Evangelist', in L.D. Hurst and N.T. Wright (eds.), *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament. Studies in Christology in Memory of G.B. Caird* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 125-38.

2. O'Day, *Revelation*, p. 31; also pp. 33-48.

3. O'Day, *Revelation*, p. 8.

4. O'Day is influenced here by MacRae's view that 'in the Fourth Gospel

more than a literary device.[1] The same problem, however, does not attach to symbol; being more than a literary device, it is better able to bear the weight of John's theological worldview. Much of this kind of analysis of irony in relation to narrative is more aptly focused on symbol, where it is genuinely illuminating.

Useful analysis of narrative elements, that nevertheless fails to give adequate attention to symbol, is found in other literary or form critical studies of the Fourth Gospel. For example, an important work that emphasises the formal, structured character of Johannine narrative is Edeltraud Leidig's analysis of the conversations between Jesus and individuals (or groups) in the Fourth Gospel.[2] Leidig identifies what she considers to be a new literary *Gattung* within John's Gospel: 'Glaubensgespräche'.[3] Each of these 'faith conversations' contains three levels and four steps within each level:[4]

(a) *Handlungsstufen*, relating to the action of Jesus.
(b) *Gesprächsschritten*, relating to Jesus' words.
(c) *Erkenntnisstufen*, dealing with the response of the partner in a series of stages of recognition or acknowledgment.

Leidig sees an overarching pattern in the stages of revelation and faith within each step of the three levels: the encounter with salvation ('Heilsbegegnen'), the offer of salvation by Jesus ('Heilsangebot'), the experience of salvation ('Heilserleben') and the confession of Jesus as the bringer of salvation ('Bekenntnis zum Heilbringer').[5]

Leidig's work is particularly important in drawing attention to the widespread, though somewhat unfocused, impression that Jesus' encounters with individuals in the Fourth Gospel are narrated in a highly structured and formalised manner. In one sense, her careful analysis confirms that impression. At the same time, the actual schema she proposes has a number of limitations. It is overly complex, with

theology *is* irony' (MacRae, 'Irony', p. 89); see Duke, *Irony*, pp. 2, 111.

1. See Duke's helpful definition in *Irony*, pp. 13-18, esp. p. 17.

2. E. Leidig, *Jesu Gespräch mit der Samaritanerin und weitere Gespräche im Johannes-evangelium* (Theologische Dissertationen, 15; Basel: F. Reinhardt Kommissionverlag, 1981).

3. Leidig, *Jesu Gespräch*, p. 162. She identifies twelve such dialogues in the Fourth Gospel (pp. 175-241).

4. Leidig, *Jesu Gespräch*, pp. 163-66.

5. Leidig, *Jesu Gespräch*, pp. 167-74.

its confusing pattern of layer upon layer. Moreover, it fails to engage with the literary critical world, remaining within the more traditional limits of form criticism. There is no awareness of narratology to give an appropriate narrative framework for the 'faith conversations'. Nor is there any attention given to the symbolism around which so many of the Johannine conversations between Jesus and individuals turn.

Finally, brief reference should be made to two important theological studies of the Fourth Gospel that elucidate the theological framework in which symbol and narrative operate. Once again, neither of these has the appropriate understanding of symbol and narrative to carry through these insights. Painter, first of all, sees the symbols of the Gospel as eminently suitable for the role they play in revealing the saving work of the Logos because they originate in the creative work of the Logos (1.3, 10). For the evangelist, the world is a 'storehouse of symbols which can become vehicles of the revelation',[1] implying an analogical relationship between biological and eternal life.[2] Through creation, the world has the potential for becoming symbolic, but it remains potential until apprehended by human beings.[3] While John does not speak of the image of God, says Painter, the notion of people as created with the potential to respond is 'the Johannine equivalent'.[4] Human beings have so failed to bear the divine image that there is an abyss between human reality (failure to perceive), revealed in the coming of the Logos, and human destiny (potential to perceive), offered in the saving work of the Revealer. The purpose of the symbols, according to Painter, is to challenge false perceptions and restore the divine image.[5]

Painter's work is helpful more for its theological understanding than for any literary analysis. The same can be said of Marianne Meye Thompson,[6] whose main agenda is to defend the centrality of σάρξ in

1. Painter, 'John 9', p. 47, and *John: Witness and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 3rd edn, 1986), pp. 140-41.

2. Painter, 'John 9', p. 53.

3. Painter, 'John 9', p. 54, quoting Bultmann, 9, and R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1965), II, p. 21.

4. Painter, 'John 9', p. 51.

5. Painter, 'John 9', pp. 50-55.

6. M.M. Thompson, *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

John's theological framework. Influenced by Bultmann,[1] she sees flesh as the neutral contrast between the human/natural and the divine (see 1.13, 1.14, 3.6, 6.51c-58, 6.63, 8.15, 17.2):

> the root meaning of flesh is humanity, creatureliness, what is natural and earthly... σάρξ refers to the human realm in contrast to the divine and natural existence in contrast to the life given by the Spirit.[2]

Thompson argues for this definition over against views that interpret σάρξ as irrelevant for faith (for example, Luise Schottroff[3]) or merely a necessary pre-condition for the appearance of 'the God who walked the earth' (Käsemann).[4] Thompson also stresses the materiality of the 'signs' as pointing to the humanity of Jesus.[5] All of this is vital for understanding John's incarnational perspective. What it lacks, however, is a theological understanding of symbol in which the incarnation can be located.[6] Thompson's attempts to balance the claims of σάρξ with that of δόξα are finally left unsupported by an adequate theological, or for that matter literary, framework.

C. *Aims of This Study*

In spite of—or perhaps because of—these insights into narrative and symbol in the Fourth Gospel, further investigation in the area is vital for the future of Johannine studies. Indeed, such work is only just beginning. This study of six narratives aims to push forward, though with significant modifications, the insights already gained, remedying omissions in a literary understanding of the Fourth Gospel in the following respects:

1. Thompson, *Humanity*, p. 34; see Bultmann, pp. 60-72, and *Theology*, II, pp. 40-49.
2. Thompson, *Humanity*, p. 49. It is important to note that, although σάρξ is a neutral term in the Fourth Gospel, it is only ever used of Jesus in a positive sense.
3. L. Schottroff, *Der Glaubende und die feindliche Welt: Beobachtungen zum gnostischen Dualismus und seiner Bedeutung für Paulus und das Johannesevangelium* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970).
4. E. Käsemann, 'The Structure and Purpose of the Prologue to John's Gospel' in *New Testament Questions of Today* (NTL; London: SCM Press, 1969), p. 161; see Thompson, *Humanity*, pp. 35-36.
5. Thompson, *Humanity*, p. 56.
6. Thompson's conviction of the materiality of 'signs' is problematical since it turns not on the notion of symbol, but rather its 'facticity' (p. 32). Whether that refers to the historical or the Johannine Jesus is unfortunately not made clear.

(a) *Symbol and Narrative.* The inter-relationship between symbol and narrative in specific Johannine narratives is largely neglected and needs greater attention. In order to achieve this, I have attempted to incorporate an adequate understanding of symbol as it is articulated through narrative, on the basis that neither can be understood without the other. In exploring the dynamic interaction of symbol and narrative I have defined more precisely the points of integration between them: the narrative gives rise to the symbol, just as the symbol creates the narrative.

(b) *Literary Structure.* I have already outlined the discrete literary structure underlying the six narrative texts of the Gospel which are the focus here. The relationship between symbol and narrative is manifested through these five narrative Stages. Within the literary pattern the relationship between narrative and symbol is validated. Scholars have examined various aspects of the narratives of the Fourth Gospel and have recognised the presence of narrative designs, sometimes with formal, structured elements. However, there has been no intensive investigation of these six narratives as a distinctive literary group. No proposed literary structure has been suggested which embraces them. This study aims to rectify that omission and in doing so, to offer fresh insights into John's narrative and theological craft.

(c) *Fusion of Literary Form and Theological Meaning.* The question of the way in which literary pattern and theological meaning cohere needs further reflection in relation to specific texts. There is a remarkable level of coherence between form and meaning within the six narratives, which is grounded in the evangelist's theology. At the basis of John's symbolic perspective, reflected in the narrative form, is that of the Word-made-flesh. Just as God, for the evangelist, can only be apprehended through the σάρξ of the incarnate Logos in whom the divine δόξα dwells, so also meaning in the Fourth Gospel can only be grasped for the implied reader through the narrative structures. Here we find also the integration of text and reader. Through a right reading of the symbolic narratives and the struggle for understanding which they reveal, an authentic reader response is facilitated. The narratives give rise to faith and to the embracing of John's symbolic worldview.

In the chapters that follow, each of the long narratives in the first half of the Fourth Gospel is examined in turn to see whether, and to what extent, it conforms to the design of symbolic narrative outlined

above (Chapters 2–7). Each narrative is placed within its chronological setting within the Gospel, followed by an outline of the narrative that deals briefly with critical and exegetical issues. The five Stages are then identified within the contours of John's theological and symbolic framework, illuminating the narrative cohesion between form and meaning. The study ends with a summation of the argument and an indication of its theological implications (Chapter 8). Before embarking on this programme, however, it is important to begin by raising some of the methodological issues operative in the interplay of form and meaning. The focus for this literary and philosophical discussion is metaphor and symbol (Chapter 1).

Chapter 1

FORM AND MEANING: METHODOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

The basic presupposition of this study of Johannine narrative is that form and meaning belong together. In John's Gospel this is not simply a literary judgment but is also theological. John's worldview is set out in the Prologue at 1.14: καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν· καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. This is a statement of the essential unity of form and meaning. The divine δόξα—in John's theological terms—is seen in the human flesh of Jesus as he is presented in the Fourth Gospel. This has implications for the whole Gospel. Jesus, the incarnate Logos, is the one who reveals not just things about God, nor even God in an abstract, metaphysical sense, but rather discloses in his own person (σάρξ) that God is to be found in material reality: 'It is in his sheer humanity that he is the Revealer.'[1] In the Johannine worldview, it means also that material and human reality (σάρξ) is to be seen in a new way as potentially God-bearing and God-revealing. Behind this lies a doctrine of creation: 'Incarnation...means, as the Prologue unmistakably indicates, the encounter of the Creator with his creature.'[2] As human beings are made in God's image (Gen. 1.26-27), so in the Johannine

1. Bultmann, p. 63. For a discussion of the centrality of revelation in the Fourth Gospel, with particular reference to Bultmann, see J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 515-53.

2. E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 1968), p. 34. Käsemann, however, does not believe that the idea of incarnation is central to John's theology. For him, σάρξ is simply a necessary pre-condition for the entry of the Logos into the world; indeed John may be accused of a 'naive docetism' in this regard (pp. 9-13, esp. p. 26).

view salvation involves centrally the human capacity to image the divine being. This is seen above all in the Johannine Jesus.

The incarnational nature of John's theology is paralleled by the way in which theological meaning is formed and carried by the literary structures of the Fourth Gospel. Narrative structures, with their attendant rhetorical devices, are indispensable bearers of meaning, creating a reader and giving rise to faith as an authentic reader response. In formalist terms, such structures cannot be peeled away in order to disclose a pure, Johannine message. Just as σάρξ cannot be discounted in John's theology, neither can narrative or symbolic form be discarded in favour of a detachable view of meaning. In this sense, form and content, in literary terms, parallel the theology of incarnation in the Fourth Gospel. Indeed they belong to the same order of reality.

A. *Importance of Literary Criticism*

From this it follows that a literary reading of John's narratives is vital, as much for an appreciation of their theology as their literary merits. A literary approach to the Gospels is relatively recent and owes much to the work of such scholars as Amos Wilder and John Dominic Crossan.[1] It has also benefited from burgeoning interest in Old Testament narratology which has rediscovered Hebrew narrative, 'eclipsed' with the rise of biblical criticism,[2] and identified its characteristic literary structures.[3] This perspective has led to a new

1. See A. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), which is concerned with rhetorical forms and genres in the language of the NT, and J.D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), which analyses the parables of Jesus from a literary perspective.

2. See H. Frei's study of this theme in eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 1974).

3. See especially the work of R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), and A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature Series, 9; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983); also R. Alter and F. Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987). Of particular note is the influence of E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of*

sensitivity to various aspects of literary form within the Gospels, and an increased awareness of the role of the reader.[1] It is linked also to a critique of the inadequacies of a methodology that regards content as prior to, and therefore more important than form.[2] Although study of the Gospels has not always been impervious to the importance of literary structure, form has often been used chiefly as an indicator of historical realities behind the text and the *Sitz im Leben* of the community. Here the meaning of the text has been sought more in the historical setting behind the text than within the literary structures.

The same problematical attitude to form is present in Bultmann's demythologising, where the myth is stripped away to expose the core of the *kerygma*.[3] Myth is seen as little more than a vehicle for conveying existential realities which speak to modern human experience.[4]

Reality in Western Literature (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953) who, writing as a literary critic, challenges the view that denies the literary nature of the Bible (esp. pp. 3-49).

1. See W.A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 1-13, and N.R. Peterson, *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 9-48, for an introduction to literary criticism from a New Testament perspective. For a brief history of the rise of literary critical approaches in biblical study, see T.R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Signposts in Theology; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 42-58.

2. This is not to say that literary form has been ignored. Form criticism has been concerned at least with the generalities of form, that is, classifying and identifying various literary forms, and reducing them to their most typical characteristics. On this, see J. Dewey, *Markan Public Debate: Literary Technique, Concentric Structure, and Theology in Mark 2.1–3.6* (SBLDS, 48; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1979), pp. 11, 18, 25, who develops a literary-critical study of the Markan text out of a preliminary form-critical analysis.

3. Speaking of the Bultmannian approach, Beardslee, *Literary Criticism*, 2, comments that 'it... thrusts literary form into the background as secondary and separable from the existential stance which the form expresses'; also L. Poland, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critique of Formalist Approaches* (AAR Academy Series, 48; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 1-2, 36, 65.

4. R. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation', in S.M. Ogden (ed.), *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 1-43. P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 388-94, takes a sympathetic, though not uncritical, view of Bultmann's demythologising. The problem with Bultmann, as Ricoeur sees it, is that he ignores the question of language and under-

Yet as critics of Bultmann have pointed out, to dismantle myth is to lose its meaning. *Kerygma* and myth are bound together; to lose the latter is to lose both.[1] The point applies equally to poetry, myth, narrative structure and symbol. Biblical poetry, for example, 'is quintessentially the mode of expression in which the surface is the depth'.[2] It is illegitimate, therefore, to search for hidden meanings which bypass the surface meaning.[3] Literary criticism, which is concerned precisely with the 'surface' of the text, has an integral role to play in the understanding and interpreting of biblical texts.[4]

A literary approach to the biblical text, however, needs to be seen as balancing the findings of the historical critical method rather than replacing or dismissing them. Alter and Sternberg, for example, two Old Testament literary critics, assert the value of historical critical methods for understanding Scripture. Sternberg, in particular, sees the historical critical method as a necessary first step in analysing a text. What literary criticism does is to move a step further and examine the literary form in and of itself. Nevertheless, both methods are desirable; at some point 'the two orientations must converge'.[5] The problem is not that scholars have concerned themselves with the text's '*genesis*', but rather that that has all too often been at the cost of

estimates the 'objectivity' of the text, because of too sharp a disjunction between *kerygma* and myth (pp. 394-401).

1. So Poland, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 11-63, 65.

2. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 205.

3. See Léon-Dufour, 'Symbolic Reading', p. 441. To substantiate the point, Léon-Dufour notes the etymology of συμβόλον as derived from συμ-βάλλω meaning to 'put together'.

4. According to the literary critic Stephen Prickett, in his study of the relationship between biblical and literary studies over the last three hundred years, the two disciplines belong together and in their modern manifestation have a common origin, being separated only artificially (*Words and* the Word: *Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986] esp. pp. 37-195). Literary criticism was brought to birth by scholars of the Bible concerned to assert the poetic nature of all biblical language and to study it from the perspective of the 'peculiar language of heaven' (p. 41). For Prickett, the two disciplines also share common concerns about the nature and interpretation of texts, and need in some way to be re-united. See also J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984), p. 141.

5. Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 23.

its '*poiesis*'.[1] Sternberg is seeking a relationship between 'genesis' and 'poiesis' that is complementary rather than polemical.[2]

B. *Dynamics of Form and Meaning*

Discussion concerning the interplay of form and meaning is by no means unique to literary and textual studies. Beneath these disciplines lie deeper questions of a philosophical nature which go the heart of our understanding of reality and the role that linguistic structure plays in it. While my purpose is not to enter into philosophical and linguistic debate on the nature of language, the underlying philosophical questions need to be acknowledged. Does language express a pre-existent meaning, or is it active in creating meaning? Is it the conveyer of meaning or does it in some sense determine what we name 'reality'? Is it legitimate to speak of language as 'the house of Being' in which we play out our human experience?

Fundamentally, what is at stake is a reaction in modern European thought to a philosophical disjunction between subject and object. This distinction, which can be traced back more immediately to Descartes, draws a line between the knowing subject (the internal mind or self) and the known object (the external world).[3] The Cartesian model, which influenced the Enlightenment, focuses on questions of epistemology rather than ontology, and posits a reality which exists 'out there', independent of I, the subject. It is in effect a revised form of dualism. Kant challenges this perspective with the epistemological recognition that the perceiver is subjectively involved in every act of perception; in philosophical terms, he 'removes the [Cartesian] privileges from subjectivity and in doing so destroys the possibility of an empiricist theory of the mind'.[4] The Cartesian method is further challenged, on the grounds of its dualistic assumptions, by Cassirer:

> Descartes' metaphysical dualism is ultimately rooted in his methodological dualism: the theory of the absolute division between the substance of

1. Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 16.

2. In a similar vein, Berlin (*Poetics*, pp. 111-34) argues that a synchronic approach does not rule out the importance of a diachronic study of the text; to accept the unity of a biblical text is not to deny its pre-history.

3. For a succinct discussion of the 'Cartesian method', see R. Scruton, *From Descartes to Wittgenstein: A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 29-39, esp. pp. 37-38.

4. Scruton, *Descartes to Wittgenstein*, p. 141.