

Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel

Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John

Edited by

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John (the Baptist): The Witness on the Threshold

Catrin H. Williams

John the Baptist stands considerably apart from the other characters who encounter Jesus in the narrated world of the Fourth Gospel. He is ascribed more direct speech than any other figure apart from Jesus, and, like Jesus, he is the subject of evocative imagery in his own self-declarations and in descriptions of him offered by others. John¹ is undoubtedly a decisive figure in the first half of the narrative, especially in the first chapter; his story and voice emerge clearly as early as the prologue (1:6–8, 15), only for both to be brought firmly to earth, and amplified, in a three-day account of his testimony and witnessing activity (1:19–28, 29–34, 35–37, 40). Recapitulation follows (3:22–30[31–36]) and, after John's final appearance, there is retrospective evaluation of his testimony (5:33–36) and of its efficacy in drawing people to Jesus (10:40–42).

What evidently binds together these episodes is John's identity and function as witness, so much so that it has become commonplace to claim that his character portrait in the Fourth Gospel is almost totally restricted to that of a witness on behalf of Jesus.² Several conspicuous textual features have prompted scholars to reach this conclusion. First, only the bare essentials are provided as far as John's character profile is concerned; well-known "Synoptic" features such as his designation as a "prophet" and his role as a preacher of repentance are striking for their absence from the Johannine narrative (cf. Mark 1:4, 11:32; Matt 3:11; 11:9; Luke 3:3), as are references to his diet and physical appearance (Mark 1:6; Matt 3:4).³ Secondly, what remains of John's otherwise well-known

characteristics now informs his characterization as a key witness to Jesus. Although the appellation "the Baptist" and an account of Jesus' baptism do not occur in the Fourth Gospel, John's water-baptism is explicitly identified as the occasion for Jesus to be revealed to Israel (John 1:31, 33). Thirdly, in all but the final scene in which John is mentioned (10:40–42), the language of "witnessing" permeates his description, either with the aid of the verb μαρτυρέω (1:7, 8, 15, 32, 34; 3:26; 5:33) or the noun μαρτυρία (1:7, 19; 5:34, 36). Fourthly, John's role as witness is given expression not only through his own speech and actions, but also in what other characters (5:33–36; 10:41) as well as the narrator (1:6–8, 15, 19) say about him.

The carefully constructed presentation of John (the Baptist) in the Johannine narrative has led to his narrative-critical categorization as a "flat" character, as one who displays the single consistent trait of bearing witness to Jesus.⁴ However, one of the inevitable consequences of pigeonholing John into the category of "flat character" is that it implies a wholly monochromatic figure lacking any signs of individuality.⁵ More recently, Cornelis Bennema has proposed that John's characterization in the Fourth Gospel is more complex, hovering between "type" and "personality."⁶ John, it is remarked, displays personal qualities such as loyalty and humility, and although he possesses one primary trait (= witness) under which all secondary traits are subsumed (= baptizer, herald, teacher, best man, lamp), the latter help to elaborate upon, adding further dimensions to, his character portrait.⁷

Bennema aptly delineates the multifaceted nature of John's role as witness, although his decision to focus exclusively on John's "character indicators"

(ed. Tom Holmen and Stanley E. Porter, vol. 2 of *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, Leiden: Brill, 2011), 1747–85.

⁴ Collins, "Beloved Disciple," 368, fn. 19; Colleen M. Conway, "Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel," *BibInt* 10 (2002): 324–41, here 330. Edward M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1962), 73–81, used the phrase "flat characters" to describe predictable and one-dimensional characters constructed around a single idea or quality, and "round characters" for those who possess more than one quality and show signs of development.

⁵ For the view that Forster's classification is too rigid, "obliterating the degrees and nuances found in actual works of narrative fiction," see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 40–41 (quotation on p. 40). See further D. Francois Tolinie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives: A Practical Guide* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publication, 1999), 54–55.

⁶ Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 30. Bennema employs the term "type" to classify characters possessing a single trait and "personality" for characters who display development and a measure of complexity but are not fully round; see idem, "A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature," *BibInt* 17 (2009): 375–421, here 407. On "types," see Horace Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 136–38, who states that "characterization by type can accommodate a great deal of human complexity" (137).

⁷ See Bennema, "Theory of Character," 403.

¹ Because the Fourth Gospel, in contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, does not use the designation "the Baptist" as his identity marker, this essay will refer to him as "John" or occasionally as "John (the Baptist)."

² See especially R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 132–33; cf. Josef Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer. Interpretation – Geschichte – Wirkungsgeschichte* (RZNW 53; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 186–216; Raymond F. Collins, "From John to the Beloved Disciple: An Essay on Johannine Characters," *Int* 49 (1995): 359–69, here 361–62.

³ On the presentation of John the Baptist in Synoptic traditions, see, for example, Josef Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer – der Lehrer Jesu* (Bibische Bücher 2; Freiburg: Herder, 1994), 11–50; Ulrich B. Müller, *Johannes der Täufer. Jüdischer Prophet und Wegbereiter Jesu* (Bibliche Gestalten 6; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), 100–62. See also Knut Backhaus, "Echoes from the Wilderness: The Historical John the Baptist," in *The Study of Jesus*

through his actions and designations⁸ overlooks the close symbiotic relationship between "character" and "characterization" in the text's literary strategy.⁹ Studying a "character" involves reconstruction and classification in the light of his/her given traits, but "characterization" entails analyzing the methods employed by an author to construct a character and, as a result, to work out his/her function in a text. Examining *how* a character is created proves to be a particularly fruitful exercise in the case of the "Johannine John (the Baptist)," for although he does not display conflicting traits and is not "capable of surprising [the reader] in a convincing way,"¹⁰ the dynamics of his characterization are both varied and striking. This essay seeks to bring John's "character" and "characterization" into direct conversation with each other, in order to examine how various literary techniques such as telling and focalization, structural patterns and setting, shape his presentation as a decisive witness to Jesus.

The "Telling" of the Witness and his Testimony (1:6–8, 15)

Observing how a character is introduced into a narrative is an essential aspect of the study of characterization: it frequently operates as the platform for establishing a character's defining features and as the lens through which that character should be viewed. From within the cosmic setting of the initial verses of the prologue (1:1–5), John (the Baptist) comes directly into view as a human witness who provides the historical anchoring for the story of the eternal Logos and light. The narrator engages in a process of "telling," through a direct form of characterization,¹¹ and highlights the human facets of John's identity by using them to frame the divine origin of his commission: "There was a man (ἦν) sent from God (ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ Θεοῦ), whose name was John (ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰωάννης)" (1:6). Articulating the relationship between his (human) identity and (divine) mission figures prominently, as we shall see, in later scenes involving John, but it is also striking that all three initial clauses about him are clothed in language echoing the scriptural introduction to figures "sent from God" in Israel's past (cf. Exod 3:10–12; 1 Sam 1:1; Isa 6:8).¹² Thus, already in the opening statement, John is characterized as a connecting link – on the threshold – between the heavenly and the earthly, the eternal and the historical, the old and the new.

⁸ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 22–30.

⁹ On the formation of "character" in relation to techniques of "characterization," see especially Rimon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 59–71.

¹⁰ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 81.

¹¹ On "direct characterization," see Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives*, 42–44.

¹² See Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 75–76; and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John: Volume 1* (trans. K. Smyth; New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 250.

Having established the source of John's mission, its nature and purpose is now carefully outlined: he came to bear witness to the light (1:7a, 8b) so that all might believe (in the light) through him (1:7b). The narrator's evaluative point of view is set out unequivocally at this juncture; while presenting John's witness for the first time, the focus is clearly on Jesus, as corroborated by the statement of qualification that John himself was not the light (1:8a).

The narrator picks up the central theme of 1:6–8 in 1:15 (Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ), this time to introduce John's boldly stated testimony (ἔκπορευεν λέγων) as affirmation and explanation why he is not the light: he may have precedence in terms of the timing of his earthly mission, but Jesus is superior to him because of his eternal priority (πρώτος μου ἦν). The close "fit" between the prologue's two sections about John aligns the narrator's words to those of John, so that John affirms the validity of what has earlier been said about him. In other words, the divinely ordained witness gives explicit expression to what the narrator has already intimated through a series of contrasting parallels: John came into being (1:6: ἐγένετο), but the Logos was (ἦν) in the beginning (1:1); John is a man (1:6), the Logos is "God" (1:1); God has sent John (1:6), the Logos is with God (1:1); John is a witness to the light (1:7–8), the Logos is the light (1:4); people come to faith in the Logos (1:12) through John (1:7).

There is one notable difference between 1:6–8 and 1:15. The former section represents John as a figure who appeared at a specific point of time in the past (1:6–8 is dominated by aorist verbal forms), but in 1:15 John speaks from the present (μαρτυρεῖ), offering a retrospective assessment (ὅτις ἦν) of Jesus' earthly mission.¹³ John's testimony, now embedded within the "we" statements of the present community (1:14–16),¹⁴ thus continues to be of enduring significance, even though he himself is a figure belonging to the past.

An examination of John's initial characterization demonstrates that, whatever the compositional history of the prologue, 1:6–8 and 15 are well integrated into their present context. What can be said of their overall function? Morna Hooker has cogently argued that both references occur at turning points in the prologue's two main sections (1:1–13, 14–18) to present John as the one who substantiates the truth of earlier statements: he testifies that the Logos is indeed the light shining in the darkness (1:1–5), the one whose incarnate glory has been seen (1:14).¹⁵ Nevertheless, from a narratological perspective, the declaratory

¹³ See Martin Stowasser, *Johannes der Täufer im vierten Evangelium: Eine Untersuchung zu seiner Bedeutung für die johanneische Gemeinde* (ÖBS 12; Klosterneuburg: Österreichisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992), 47; Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12* (RNT; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009), 131; cf. C. Kingsley Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (2d ed.; London: SPCK, 1978), 167.

¹⁴ See in particular Andrew T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), 59–60.

¹⁵ See Morna D. Hooker, "John the Baptist and the Johannine Prologue," *NTS* 16 (1970): 354–58, here 356–57.

statements in 1:6–8 and 15 also possess an anticipatory function, providing a link between the prologue and what follows, and, most importantly, outlining the main contours of John's character. As has been widely recognized, 1:6–8 offers a "threefold *schema* that controls subsequent sections dealing with the Baptist,"¹⁶ especially 1:19–37 but also other parts of the narrative:

- a) John was not the light (1:8a; see 1:19–21; 3:28; 10:41).
- b) He came to bear witness to the light (1:7a, 8b; see 1:29–34, 36; 3:26; 5:33; 10:41).
- c) He bore witness so that all might believe in the light (1:7b; see 1:35–37; 3:26; 5:34; 10:41–42).

Given that John's testimony (1:15) confirms and elaborates upon the narrator's earlier statements, especially a) and b), a fourth aspect from the prologue should be added:

- d) John is subordinate to Jesus (1:15; see 1:27, 30; 3:28–30; 5:34–35).

As we shall see, the prologue's statements about John are determinative for his characterization elsewhere in the text. The four features noted above establish a recognizable pattern, albeit with different configurations, which sum up the narrator's point of view and which are intended as a guide for the implied reader in his/her evaluation of John. The prologue, in this respect, engages in a process of "telling,"¹⁷ focusing on key features and character traits that pass as an evaluative blueprint for John's characterization in other parts of the narrative. The narrator undoubtedly relies on him – and other characters – to both "show" and "tell" his traits and motives in subsequent scenes, but all the basic ingredients have been outlined in the prologue; some embellishment may be detected around the edges, but the implied reader's perception of John will not change.

John's Testimony Over Three Days (1:19–28, 29–34, 35–42)

After the "telling" of John and his witness in the prologue, the narrator shifts, with considerable ease (a simple *kai*), to offer a new introduction that picks up and focuses on the core subject of 1:6–8 and 15: "This is the testimony (*koti*

¹⁶ Charles H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 248–49. See also Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 197; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 31.

¹⁷ On the narratological techniques of "telling" and "showing," see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 3–16; Mark A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1993), 52–53; James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 126–30.

αὐτοῦ ἐστιν ἡ μαρτυρία) of John" (1:19). Once again, John functions as a bridge bringing together the historical past and the living present. The continuing significance of his testimony, first communicated at a concrete time and place (cf. 1:19: ὅτι),¹⁸ is encapsulated by the use of the present tense in the opening statement (ἐστιν; cf. 1:15). Furthermore, although John's central character traits have already been set out in the prologue, his characterization in the rest of the first chapter highlights his crucial role in plot development. Through temporal sequences and causal links, the nature, scope and purpose of John's testimony over three days are made unquestionably apparent: John outlines his own limitations and role as a witness to a nameless figure (1:19–28), one whose appearance "the next day" prompts John to offer a witnessing monologue (1:29–34), with the result that, on the following day, two of his disciples become followers of Jesus (1:35–36).

Despite significant demarcation markers, there is no doubt that, as far as the characterization of John is concerned, emphasis should be placed on the unity of these three scenes. The temporal signals (τῇ ἐπαύριον) may point to a change of time/scene, but they also establish continuity for John's testimony over three days, whereas the spotlight on his witness is conveyed by the "witnessing" *inclusio* framing the beginning of the first scene (1:19) and the end of the second (1:34).¹⁹ Repetition links together John's three-stage testimony (1:29, 36), and several commentators have noted that his threefold denial about his own significance (1:20–21: not the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet) "parallels" his three-part proclamation about Jesus' identity (1:30, 33, 34: Lamb of God, Spirit-baptizer, Chosen/Son of God).²⁰

Regarding John's character presentation on the first day (1:19–28), certain narrative strategies are identifiable which show him redirecting attention away from himself towards Jesus. The initial focus is clearly on John, whom the Jewish religious authorities question in the starkest possible terms: "Who are you?" (1:19). And yet, while John does offer a bold and unequivocal response with reference to his own identity,²¹ the formulation itself, "I am not the Mes-

¹⁸ In particular see Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 272–73.

¹⁹ As noted by, among others, Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I (1–xii)*, (AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966), 67; Tobias Nicklas, *Ablösung und Verstrickung: "Juden" und Jünger als Charaktere der erzählten Welt des Johannesevangeliums und ihre Wirkung auf den implizierten Leser* (KST 60; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 100.

²⁰ Cf. Stibbe, *John*, 34; Johannes Rink, *Kerygma und Autopsie: Der christologische Disput als Spiegel johanneischer Gemeindegeschichte* (Herders Biblische Studien 12; Freiburg: Herder, 1997), 272.

²¹ Boldness of speech is one of John's character traits (cf. 1:15, 23), as indicated by the narrator's introduction to his first disavowal: "He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed . . ." (1:20). The pleonastic form of this statement suggests that, integral to this scene's judicial atmosphere, is John's unwavering witness before the religious authorities (cf. 9:22; 12:42; 13:38; 18:25, 27). On placing John as witness within the Johannine framework of a cosmic lawsuit, see Anthony E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial: A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (London:

siyah" (ἐὶς οὐκ εἰμι ὁ χριστός), with its likely emphatic ἐγώ, already indicates that there is another figure to whom this title belongs, but who, at this point, remains in the shadows of the narrative.

Further probing by the Jewish delegation (1:21: "Are you Elijah?," "Are you the prophet?") leads to other, progressively briefer, denials by John (1:21: οὐκ εἰμι ... οὐ), before he makes the first positive pronouncement about his identity with the aid of Isaiah 40:3: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (1:23). This declaration contributes to the character portrait of John in a number of significant ways. He is the only figure in the Fourth Gospel to appropriate and actualize the words of Scripture for the purpose of self-description. Indeed, in view of the judicial character of this scene, with its emphasis on witness, interrogation, confession and lack of denial (1:20), John's self-testimony is joined to Isaiah's testimony to give it validity and authority.²³ Through Isaiah's words, John overtly identifies himself with the herald who proclaims God's message of imminent salvation (Isa 40:3–5). Thus, despite his eagerness to deflect attention away from himself, he is not stripped of all significance.²⁴ John's embodiment as the Isaianic voice is, in fact, integral to his characterization as the divinely appointed witness, because it is precisely through his testimony to Jesus that he makes straight the way of the Lord. The implied reader, who knows from the outset that John's exclusive role is to bear witness to Jesus, will make this connection with relative ease. Even the setting "in the wilderness" connotes a character trait that has already been established in the prologue, from a literary and theological perspective, the wilderness symbolizes the "in-between space,"²⁵ between captivity and freedom, between the past and the future. The wilderness can also serve as a temporary dwelling place,²⁶ which, as a metonym for John's status, indicates that he will not be the subject of debate for long. Given that the Isaianic "way of the Lord" in the Fourth Gospel

is realized in the coming of Jesus,²⁷ the one to whom John bears witness, albeit indirectly at this stage, is increasingly coming into focus.

A more pronounced shift occurs in 1:24–26, when John's interlocutors proceed to ask him about the significance of his baptism. No explicit connection is made at this point between John's water-baptism and Jesus (cf. 1:31), but he immediately shifts attention away from his own activity: "Among you stands one whom you do not know" (1:26). For the first time, reference is made in veiled fashion to an unnamed "other," one whose superiority explains why John must rule out any role for himself other than as the herald for the "coming one." Jesus may remain physically concealed, but his presence gradually infiltrates John's testimony on the first day.²⁸

The nature of John's testimony does change when Jesus makes his first appearance (1:29–34), although Jesus remains "der große Schweigende" throughout this scene.²⁹ When the narrator remarks that John sees Jesus coming towards him, the implied reader is simply left to speculate why he approaches John; it evidently provides an occasion for the next instalment of testimony, but it also acts as an instant illustration of how John "makes straight the way of the Lord" by pointing and testifying to Jesus (cf. 1:23). The description of actions (1:29): John sees Jesus approaching) can be defined, in narratological terms, as an example of external focalization; that is, the narrator provides the lens through which events or characters are seen.³⁰ More or less immediately, however, the focus turns to John's observations on Jesus, who now becomes the object of internal – or character-bound – focalization.³¹ Until the end of this encounter (1:29–34), and briefly during the early stages of the next scene (1:36), John remains the vehicle for focalization, and the rich monologue that follows is narrated entirely from his perspective.

²³ See in particular Cathrin H. Williams, "Isaiah in John's Gospel," in *Isaiah in the New Testament* (ed. Steven Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 100–16, here 103–04.

²⁴ T. Francis Glasson, "John the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel," *ExpTim* 67 (1955–56): 245–46, here 245. Following Nestle-Aland (27th edition) one notes that John's succinct negations about his own identity (eight words in total) are replaced by increasingly longer positive statements of i) self-identification (1:23: fifteen words) and ii) a description of Jesus (1:26–27: twenty-six words).

²⁵ Michael Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung des Logos: Studien zum Verhältnis des Johannesprologs zum Corpus des 4. Evangeliums und zum 1. Johannesbrief* (NTAbh 20; Münster: Aschendorff, 1988), 275.

²⁶ On focalization, see especially Rummel-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 73–86; Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, 73–74, 233; Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (3d ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 145–65.

²⁷ See further Rinke, *Kerygma und Autopsie*, 272; Judith Hartenstein, *Charakterisierung im Dialog: Maria Magdalena, Petrus, Thomas und die Mutter Jesu im Johannesevangelium im Kontext anderer frühchristlicher Darstellungen* (NTWA/SUNT 64; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 41.

SPCK, 1976); and Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, who describes John as "the first witness called in the trial proceedings" (58).

²² For the view that John's three decreasing replies (1:20–21) amount to a "faint evoking of a process of self-emptying" (cf. 3:30), see Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 150.

²³ With Isaiah as his co-witness ("as the prophet Isaiah said"), John's testimony accords with the Jewish legal requirement for at least two witnesses (Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; 19:15). However, because John has been "sent" by God (1:6), the implied reader expects him to be an authentic witness.

²⁴ Pace Collins, "Beloved Disciple," 361: "only a voice."

²⁵ A phrase coined by Reseque, *Narrative Criticism*, 95. For ancient Jewish traditions on the wilderness as a (temporary) place of preparation, see, for example, Richard A. Horsley & Jonathan A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance, and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), 264–65.

²⁶ See Reseque, *Narrative Criticism*, 96.

This shift to John as focalizer operates as a significant literary strategy as far as his characterization is concerned. In contrast to the previous scene, John's testimony to Jesus possesses a strong visual-optical dimension in 1:29b–34. The action is to be observed through his eyes, and the implied reader's gaze is aligned with John's point of observation, in the knowledge that he is a divinely commissioned witness (1:33; cf. 1:6). One clear focalizing marker is the use of *idē* in the exclamation, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29; cf. 1:36). John, through an act of speech, points to and encourages unspecified others to look at the one who has hitherto been hidden. Through a scripturally saturated statement, in which Passover lamb imagery (cf. 19:14, 29, 36) has, in all likelihood, been combined with echoes of the description of the Servant of God (Isa 53:4, 7, 12 LXX), John already looks ahead to Jesus' way of dealing with sin.³² The threefold use of the demonstrative phrase *oútōs éortē* (1:30, 33, 34) provides yet another focalizing marker, binding together John's claim that the now visibly present Jesus is the one whose pre-eminence he has already declared (1:30; cf. 1:27), the one whose baptism with the Holy Spirit has earlier been announced to John by God (1:33), the one who is "the Chosen One of God" (1:34).³³

What evidently undergirds John's witnessing gaze on Jesus in this scene is his own earlier experience,³⁴ particularly what he himself *saw* when the Spirit descended on Jesus, presumably on the occasion of his baptism (1:32: *τεθέσται; 1:33: ἐὼν ἄν ὄψης; 1:34: καὶ τὸ ἐώρακα*). In the previous scene John's baptizing activity only gradually comes into view (1:25, 26, 28), and his response to the Jewish delegation's question about its significance is delayed until the following day: the purpose of John's water-baptism is to reveal Jesus to Israel (1:31). Given that the verb *φανερώω* in the Fourth Gospel repeatedly connotes "an emergence from concealment and obscurity to disclosure,"³⁵ John's baptism parallels the narrative function, through focalization, of his spoken testimony: the hidden one is unveiled and, when seen, is made known.³⁶

³² As aptly remarked by Ruben Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10* (WUNT 171, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 114–15, the rich scriptural background and sacrificial connotations of the "lamb" metaphor prompt the reader to identify a connection with Jesus' death.

³³ For the view that the reading *ὁ ἐκλεκτός τοῦ θεοῦ* ("Chosen One of God") is to be preferred over *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ* ("the Son of God"), see Tze-Ming Quek, "A Text-Critical Study of John 1:34," *NTS* 55 (2009): 22–34. Isaianic echoes can be detected in the declaration that Jesus is the Chosen One of God (Isa 42:1) upon whom the Spirit remained (11:2; 42:1; 61:1).

³⁴ As highlighted by Angelika Ottlilinger, *Vorbild oder Zeuge? Zum Wandel des Täuferbildes im Johannesevangelium* (Dissertationen: Theologische Reihe 45; St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1991), 85.

³⁵ Stibbe, *John*, 35. Cf. John 2:11; 3:21; 7:4; 9:3.

³⁶ The enduring significance of John's testimony (cf. 1:15, 19) is again suggested at the end of this scene by the use of two perfect tenses: "And I myself have seen (*ὥρακα*) and testified (*μαρτυρήκα*) that this is the Chosen One (or Son) of God" (1:34).

The third scene (1:35–42) opens with another instance of external focalization as the narrator depicts John seeing Jesus walking by. John once again, albeit only fleetingly, becomes the narrative's perspectival filter (1:36: "Behold the Lamb of God"). The narrator, however, quickly resumes the position of focalizer to state that, as a consequence of John's testimony, two of his disciples gravitate towards Jesus, who turns and, for the first time, speaks: "What are you looking for?" (1:38). John at this point simply disappears from the scene, and the one further reference to him in this chapter (1:40) already points back to his *earlier* witnessing activity; his work is nearly done and Jesus is now visibly on centre stage.

The Last Testimony of John (3:22–30[31–36])

John makes his next (and last) appearance, as speaker, when Jesus departs to the Judean countryside to engage in a baptizing ministry with his disciples (3:22; cf. 4:2). No direct encounter is mentioned, but the scene is shaped in a way that highlights certain affinities between John and Jesus: both baptize in a similar, but geographically separate, setting (3:22–24) and both have disciples (3:22, 25) who address them as "Rabbi" (3:26; cf. 1:49; 3:2). These parallels serve as a platform for a discussion of their relationship, which John addresses directly in his final testimony (3:27–30, 31–36).

Like their master before them, John's disciples "point" to Jesus (3:26: *idē oútōs*), although their outlook on him is coloured by two new features: Jesus is now well-known and "all are going to him" (3:26). The suspicion bubbling under the surface, that "Jesus' growth in fame and reputation comes at the expense of John and his disciples,"³⁷ is later corroborated by the Pharisees: "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" (4:1). Donning the mantle of the rabbi, John therefore teaches his disciples that Jesus' growing popularity is of divine origin (3:27: "given from heaven") as indeed is his own diminution.

John's role, narratologically, is once again to shift the focus away from himself, this time by revisiting his original testimony. The repetition of his earlier denial, "I am not the Messiah" (3:28; cf. 1:20), invites the implied reader to include consistency among his "paradigm of traits."³⁸ Repetition can have many literary functions,³⁹ but the large number of analeptic echoes in John's

³⁷ Jerome H. Neyrey, "He Must Increase, I Must Decrease" (John 3:30), in *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009), 123–142, here 125.

³⁸ See further Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 126–27.

³⁹ Reseigle, *Narrative Criticism*, 42, notes the use of repetition as a stylistic device for the

speech projects the image of a reliable witness, whose oft-repeated declarations about Jesus' superiority (1:15, 26, 30) and his own limitations as a forerunner (3:28; cf. 1:20, 27, 30) are borne out by the reported movement of followers from John to Jesus. John's testimony may continue to have impact (3:26: μεμαρτύρηκα), but the scene's emphasis on the reiteration of past words, as well as his disciples' role as a fresh link in the chain of witnesses, suggest that his witnessing activity is something that increasingly belongs to the past.⁴⁰

A new element is, admittedly, introduced into John's reflections on his role: he is the friend of the bridegroom whose joy is fulfilled when he stands and hears the bridegroom's voice (3:29). Intriguingly, this metaphorical description of John's positive reception of Jesus ("hearing his voice," cf. 5:25; 10:3–4, 16) bears little resemblance to his earlier characterization, where the emphasis has fallen on what John has seen rather than heard. Nevertheless, the wide-ranging duties of the bridegroom's friend in Jewish marriage traditions help to reinforce John's ascribed role as the loyal witness who joyfully acknowledges Jesus' growing success.⁴¹ This scene, in fact, offers several anticipatory indicators of John's pithy declaration, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (3:30). The disciples' remark that "all are going to him [Jesus]" (3:26; cf. 4:1) has been the catalyst for John to admit that the time for his withdrawal has arrived, as already signalled by the parenthetical comment that "John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison" (3:24). In addition to situating these events before the Galilean phase of Jesus' ministry (cf. Mark 1:14–15), the comment acts as a signal to the implied reader that John's imprisonment – and demise – is imminent.

His departure is not narrated at this point, but neither is it made clear that his spoken testimony is over. Despite many theories about the status of 3:31–36, the lack of a compelling reason for positing a different speaker suggests that it can be read as John's uninterrupted explanation of his words in 3:27–30.⁴² John explicitly contrasts how he, like all human beings, is "of the earth," while Jesus alone is "from above" (3:31) and faith in him leads to eternal life (3:36). Because what Jesus offers is of a wholly different order, John willingly embraces Jesus' increase and his own decrease through this "swan song" testimony.

purpose of emphasis, for adding force or clarity to a statement, and for identifying narrative structure and design.

⁴⁰ Cf. Brodie, *John*, 206.

⁴¹ Miriam and Ruben Zimmermann, "Der Freund des Bräutigams (Joh 3,29): Dehoration- oder Christuszeugnis?" ZNW 90 (1999): 123–28; Mary L. Coloe, "Witness and Friend: Symbolism Associated with John the Baptist," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language* (ed. Jörg Frey et al.; WUNT 200; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 319–32, here 324–26.

⁴² This is the view adopted, for example, by Barrett, *John*, 224; Jeffrey Wilson, "The Integrity of John 3:22–36," JSNT 10 (1981): 36–40. Cf. however Stowasser, *Johannes der Täufer*, 159–61.

The Narrative Dwindling and Departure of John (5:33–36; 10:40–42)

Only after John's final appearance does Jesus, for the first time, speak directly about the one sent ahead of him. He is among an array of witnesses invoked by Jesus when he informs "the Jews" that his testimony does not stand alone, but is legitimated by his works, the Scriptures, and by the Father (5:31–39). His interlocutors are reminded that they sent a delegation to John (5:33; cf. 1:19–27), thereby attaching some importance to his role as witness. Jesus himself acknowledges that John bore enduring witness to the truth (5:33: μεμαρτύρηκεν) and that his testimony can lead to faith and salvation (5:34; cf. 1:7, 37; 10:41–42). However, Jesus does not need to rely on, or appeal to, that testimony (5:34), because a human witness like John can only testify to, not legitimize, the works of God.⁴³ At this point, Jesus confirms what has earlier been intimated about John's identity (cf. 1:6): he is a human being sent by God, who, by his own admission, is "of the earth" (3:31).

The limitations of John's testimony are then articulated in a number of subtle ways. For Jesus to describe him as a "burning and shining lamp" (5:35: λύχνος) confirms what the implied reader has known since the prologue: John is not the true light (1:8–9). His witness helps to diffuse the light, but God initiates or "kindles" his testimony (5:35: ὁ καίεινός).⁴⁴ Similarly, the pastness of his witnessing activity is accentuated (5:35: ἦν), as is its transitoriness (πρὸς ὥραν). On one level, Jesus' estimation of John is somewhat surprising, as considerable importance has been attached to his testimony during the early stages of the narrative. And yet, this assessment is not at odds with the earlier characterization of John; if anything it substantiates the reliability of his witness, since from the outset he has been depicted as being under no illusion about Jesus' superiority as well as his own restricted role.

Striking a fine balance between asserting John's significance and limitations is maintained in 10:40–42, which offers a key transitional point now that Jesus' public ministry draws to an end. The setting is of course significant, because the initial reference to Jesus' withdrawal to the place where John had earlier been baptizing (10:40; cf. 1:28) takes Jesus "back to the beginning."⁴⁵ He may have returned to the same location, but this time it is marked by John's absence not his presence. Though a figure of the past (10:41: ἐποίησεν ... ἐτην; cf. 5:33–36), his witness remains alive because many believe in Jesus on

⁴³ Cf. Stowasser, *Johannes der Täufer*, 227–28; Müller, *Johannes der Täufer*, 181–82; Klaus Wengst, *Das Johannesevangelium: I. Teilband: Kapitel 1–10* (2d ed.; Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 4, 1; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2004), 216.

⁴⁴ Cf. Barrett, *John*, 265; Francis J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5–12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 21.

⁴⁵ Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 378. Cf. Stowasser, *Johannes der Täufer*, 232–33.

the basis of John's testimony (10:41–42). An implied contrast with Jesus, who performs many signs, is suggested by the crowd's remark that "John did no sign" (10:41), but their immediately subsequent affirmation, "Everything that John said about this man was true," demonstrates that his testimony in fact serves to corroborate Jesus' signs.⁴⁶

To the end, John plays his role as witness. Taken back to the narrative beginning, the implied reader recognizes that all the ingredients of "telling" from the prologue now recur through "showing" in this epilogue: John's mission was to bear witness to Jesus; he was not the light (he did no sign), but people come to faith through his enduring and reliable testimony. 10:40–42 thus offers "closure" on John,⁴⁷ all the expectations raised earlier about him have been satisfactorily met. Admittedly, what one encounters at the end of John 10 is character closure, not narrative closure. The Johannine story of Jesus continues and, in the absence of a replacement witness within the narrative – at least until the appearance of the Beloved Disciple (13:23–26; 19:35; 20:8; 21:7, 24) – readers are themselves encouraged to take up the witnessing role while "the cosmic lawsuit continues to unfold."⁴⁸ However, as far as John's character portrait is concerned, there are no more loose ends, no gaps to be filled; John has no further role to play in the text.

The Character of John (the Baptist)

The Fourth Gospel offers a consistent and highly controlled presentation of John. Neither the narrator nor the narrated characters veer at all from his representation as a key witness to Jesus. Indeed, the sparseness of character details, the unswerving focus on the scope and purpose of his testimony, as well as the repeated avowals of his limitations (1:8, 20; 3:28; 5:35; 10:41) and subordination to Jesus (1:15, 27, 30; 3:29–30), can give the impression that he is more of a functional agent than an individual personality.⁴⁹ John's stable and recurring qualities have the effect, moreover, of lending certain predictability to his characterization. The validity of his testimony is repeatedly accentuated (5:33–35; 10:41–42), whereas his boldness of speech (1:15, 20, 23)

and frequently noted reliability, through analeptic echoes of earlier claims, project the image of a loyal and credible witness.

John's character may not be sufficiently unpredictable to allow one to categorize him as a complex and multilayered figure, but this is not to deprive him of some degree of movement and individualization within the narrative. A brief glimpse into his inner life is given in 1:33, by virtue of an embedded analepsis⁵⁰ in which John recalls his earlier transition from ignorance to knowledge following his vision of the Spirit's descent on Jesus. John's evaluative point of view thus changes as a result of divine revelation. Moreover, there are occasional hints that some prior knowledge of John is assumed on the part of the implied reader, who, in turn, is encouraged to fill in certain gaps.⁵¹ When the narrator states, "John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison" (3:24), it is taken for granted that the story of John's imprisonment (and death) is already well known, suggesting that the world behind the text is being evoked at this point.⁵² This is not to deny that the characterization of John does, by and large, possess a self-referential quality containable within the narrative text.

While the highly stylized nature of John's character in the Fourth Gospel suggests that he functions as a type with a single overarching trait, it does not follow that he is also a typical figure. It is not uncommon for him to be tagged as a "representative figure," even as a paradigm of the Christian preacher/believer,⁵³ but usually without probing further into the characterizateness of the terms "representative" and "paradigm" with reference to his characterization. Insofar as John "sees" Jesus and bears witness to him, he undoubtedly sets an example to be followed by others. He also betrays certain affinities with the Beloved Disciple, whose own "true" testimony similarly leads to faith (19:35; 21:24).⁵⁴ However, the differences between them in their capacity as "model witnesses" should not be overlooked. As far as the plot is concerned, John provides an early and decisive link in a chain of witnesses, and the focus of interest is not his belief-response resulting from a face-to-face encounter with Jesus but what he sees as a result of divine commission.

John's unique features as a witness should also not be underestimated. No other "disciple" in the Fourth Gospel reveals such a deep understanding of Jesus' true identity. He is the only human witness to declare Jesus' pre-existence (1:15, 30) and to anticipate the significance of his earthly mission in its entirety, including what he accomplishes through his death, as the Lamb of

⁴⁶ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St John* (BNTC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005), 312–13.

⁴⁷ Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, 230: "When a narrative ends in such a way as to satisfy the expectations and answer the questions that it has raised, it is said to close, or to have closure."

⁴⁸ Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 175.

⁴⁹ See in particular Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (SBLDS 167, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 52–53.

⁵⁰ For this term, see Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives*, 90.

⁵¹ Cf. Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives*, 40.

⁵² See Benemata, "Theory of Character," 399–402.

⁵³ See Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer*, 215; Raymond F. Collins, *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain: Peeters, 1990), 11.

⁵⁴ Cf. Zimmermann, "Der Freund des Bräutigams," 129; Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*, 65.

God (1:29), and through his resurrection, as the one who baptizes with the Spirit (1:33; cf. 7:38–39; 20:22). That John's profound christological insights stem from divine revelation is suggested by the narrative's clear emphasis on God as the source of his witnessing mission. He is the only character other than Jesus and the Paraclete to be described as "sent" by God (1:6, 33), and, as the recipient of heavenly communication (1:32–33), his status is clearly different from that conferred on other Johannine "earthly" characters.

John's characterization as a divinely authorized figure aligns him more closely, in this respect, to key prophetic figures like Moses (Exod 3:10–15) and Isaiah (6:8), both of whom are depicted in the Fourth Gospel as witnesses to Jesus (1:45; 5:46; 12:41; cf. 8:56). John may deny that he is "the prophet" in an eschatological sense (1:21),⁵⁵ but the origin and nature of his mission bears close resemblance to that of past prophets. His "prophetic" status may even explain his curious lack of direct interaction with Jesus; like Moses, he bears witness to the protagonist without any suggestion that he converses directly with him,⁵⁶ and, like Isaiah, he speaks about, rather than with, Jesus (12:41). In fact, of all the narrated Johannine characters, it is with Isaiah that John shares the most striking similarities. Already at an early stage of his mission, he overtly binds his testimony to that of Isaiah (1:23) and several of his christological testimonies are steeped in Isaianic language (1:29, 32, 34).⁵⁷ John, like Isaiah, testifies to what he has seen (12:41), even using the words of his predecessor to furnish his testimony with content and prophetic authority.

John's distinctively prophetic contours in the Fourth Gospel are part and parcel of his characterization as one who belongs to the "in-between" times. With his sound witnessing credentials, John stands on the threshold between promise and fulfillment, between the old and the new. He may be closely linked to significant figures from the past, but his testimony, at the same time, looks forward to what Jesus will accomplish through his life, death and resurrection. Straddling the divide is one of John's most distinguishing features and, for that reason, it is difficult to "place" him or pin him down. After the "telling" of the prologue, he emerges at a point of transition – both spatially (in the wilderness) and chronologically (on the first day) – embodying the Isaianic voice and announcing the appearance of "the coming one." Through his witnessing activity John is able usher in and point to Jesus, but, once Jesus' public ministry is underway and the in-between stage is passing, John's fate is to diminish and fade away. His legacy as a character is that he fulfills a bridge-like role. John's earthly mission belongs firmly to the past, but his testimony still speaks loudly in the present.

⁵⁵ Cf. Maarten J. J. Menken, *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form* (Biblical Exegesis and Theology 15; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 133.

⁵⁶ See Hartenstein, *Charakterisierung in Dialog*, 112.

⁵⁷ See further Williams, "Isaiah in John's Gospel," 104–106.

The World: Promise and Unfulfilled Hope

Christopher W. Skinner

Introduction

Within the story of the incarnate *Logos*, the Fourth Gospel introduces its readers to the multi-layered and theologically significant term, *ὁ κόσμος* ("the world").¹ In Hellenistic Greek, *κόσμος* carries a range of meanings, several of which are employed by the Fourth Evangelist.² The term is used to refer to the material reality of the created world,³ the physical realm into which Jesus has entered,⁴ and the object of God's affection and salvific intentions.⁵ However, of greater importance for the present study is the term's metonymical function as a symbol for humanity. In at least eight instances in John, *κόσμος* emerges as a technical term for the human race and in those contexts is presented with a "distinctly pejorative meaning."⁶ This nuance is especially important for the unfolding story of the Johannine Jesus.

While many commentators have analyzed the significance of the term *κόσμος* in John, few have written examining the world as a character or character group. Both Lars Kierspel⁷ and Cornelis Bennisma⁸ have treated the world as a

¹ The term is used 78 times in the Fourth Gospel and appears in all but four chapters (chs. 2, 5, 19, and 20).

² See H. Sasse, "κόσμος," *TDNT* 3:868–98; BDAG, s. v. *κόσμος*, 561–63.

³ Most notably 1:10b: *ὁ κόσμος ὃν αὐτοῦ ἐβέβητο*.

⁴ The Fourth Gospel presents Jesus as the one who has come "from above." Thus, his departure from the Father represents his entrance into "the world," the realm of "below." On this, see 1:9, 10a, 3:17b, 19, 6:14.

⁵ See, among others, 1:29; 3:16, 17c; 4:42; 6:51.

⁶ "Obscure though its etymology remains to this day, *κόσμος* is still beyond doubt one of the principal concepts of Greek thought. It was, to be sure, the richness of its various meanings that fitted it for the role it played in Greco-Hellenistic philosophy ... For in this variety of meanings lay its potential to become 'one of the most important terms in Greek philosophy' and 'one of the great original creations of the Greek spirit.' It is, therefore, doubly puzzling that *κόσμος* comes to have a distinctly pejorative meaning in the NT, and particularly in the Gospel of John" (Stanley B. Marrow, "κόσμος in John," *CBQ* 64 [2002]: 90) (emphasis added).

⁷ Lars Kierspel, *The Jews and the World in the Fourth Gospel: Parallelism, Function, and Context* (WUNT II/220; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), especially chs. 3 and 4.

⁸ Cornelis Bennisma, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 31–37.

