

Christopher W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (The Library of New Testament Studies 461; London – New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2013). Pp. XXXII + 288. \$27,89. ISBN 978-05-672-59-653

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The book consists of fourteen articles. After the preface there is a list of abbreviations and of contributors. The introduction (p. xvii-xxxii) is written by Christopher W. Skinner and deals with reflections on the *status quaestionis*. The introduction shows major steps in character studies from the mid-70s and a short survey of the articles in the present volume. Skinner begins with an observation that there were two books which marked the beginning of the new era of narrative criticism: R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1993) and D. Rhoads, D. Michie, *Mark as Story* (1982). Then he presents many other works on the field. The present volume “is concerned with current directions in both the theory and exegesis of Johannine characters” (p. xviii).

The first part of the book is both theoretical and methodological. It is titled “Methods and Models for Reading Johannine Characters” and comprises seven articles. The first one “A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel” (pp. 3-17) is by James L. Resseguie. The author explains five aspects of John’s narrative which are: objective and subjective/ideological point of view, rhetorical devices e.g. simile, metaphor, irony, setting (geographical, architectural, temporal, political, social etc.), characters shown mostly using indirect presentation and a master plot. A narrative-critical method is complementary to traditional methods. It asks new questions and helps to see familiar texts in a fresh way.

The rest of the articles in the first part of the book are dedicated to different aspects of characters studies. R. Alan Culpepper starts his contribution “The Weave of the Tapestry: Character and Theme in John” (pp. 18-35) with a presentation of origin and development of these studies. Contrary to usual proceedings, Culpepper presents active characters not as individuals but in their connection to the major themes of the Fourth Gospel. In order to do it he uses the following division: John 1; 2–4; 5–10; 11–12; 13–17 and 18–21. The result of this research is the conclusion that John’s characters not only present various responses to Jesus but also are ‘plot functionaries’.

In “A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character” (pp. 36-58) Cornelis Bennema disagrees with the position that biblical characters are flat, with little complexity and development. He argues that applying modern literature methods to study ancient characters is possible and legitimate. His approach to characters studies has three dimensions. Firstly, he takes into account socio-historical knowledge besides the text of the Gospel. Secondly, he classifies biblical characters as points along continua (complexity, development and inner life) which gives the following degrees of characterization: agent, type, personality, individual. Lastly, the characters are evaluated from the author’s ideological point of view and their relation to the plot. In the case of John’s Gospel the view is their response (belief or unbelief) to Jesus, while the plot is the revelation of the Father and the Son. Bennema claims his theory to be comprehensive and non-reductionist.

Chapter IV written by Judith Christine Single Redman is titled “Eyewitness Testimony and the Characters” (pp. 59-78). Redman studies the level of historicity of Jesus by using theories of characterization and the work of psychologists on eyewitness testimony and human memory. To begin with, she dissents from the opinion that characters in the Fourth Gospel are used to show different responses to Jesus. Rather they represent real live people and cannot be put into two separate categories of believers and non-believers. Moving on to Gospel as eyewitness testimony Redman lists and gives details about some problems which lead to inaccuracy in memory. They are: absent-mindedness, transience, suggestibility, bias and misattribution. The conclusion is that Jesus’ words and actions are told in a way that it gives a gist of what really happened but we cannot say the details are accurate.

Raymond F. Collins’ contribution “‘Who Are You?’ Comparison/Contrast and Fourth Gospel Characterization” (pp. 79-95) although placed in the first part of the book, contains almost no theory. After a short introduction the author presents adverse figures of sisters Martha and Mary, then characters of Thomas and other disciples, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. To compare and contrast characters the evangelist uses their status, words and actions and indications of time and place. The article finishes with a short description of Peter and the beloved disciple. No conclusion is provided. This seems to be the weakest contribution in the whole volume.

Susan E. Hylen starts her study “Three Ambiguities: Historical Context, Implied Reader, and the Nature of Faith” (pp. 96-110) with a remark that John’s characters are no longer regarded as flat. She argues that they are complex and ambiguous and it is not necessary to put them into rigid categories of belief or unbelief. Still, dualistic reading of the text is also possible. In the first paragraph Hylen presents the relation between the narrative text and its historical context.

The example are Jews whose various attitudes are explained not as different stages in Gospel's composition but as ambiguous characters. John's implied audience does not have to be seen as a community of insiders separated from the world. Another way of understanding an implied reader is to see them as explorers and learners.

The last article of the first section of the book is "Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization: Reading John's Characters Through the Lens of the Prologue" by Christopher W. Skinner (pp. 111-127). Johannine Prologue is generally seen as a key to understanding Jesus' origin and identity. It gives a reader knowledge not acquired by the characters. Skinner seeks to draw connections between the role of the Prologue, Christology of the Fourth Gospel and the motif of misunderstanding, which is one of the main concepts of the Gospel. First, the main themes of the Prologue are analyzed (Word, life, light, world) along with the character of the Logos. Then as a test case the character of Peter is chosen. Unfortunately, the chapter 21 is not included although it is important in the presentation of this apostle. It turns out that uncomprehending characters in the Fourth Gospel help an implied reader to understand the person of Jesus by relating all that is said about him to insider's knowledge. These characters also aid to elucidate other theological topics in the Gospel.

The second part of the book is exegetical and contains seven contributions which are character studies within narrative-critical framework. On pages 131-146 "The Fourth Gospel's Characterization of God: A Rhetorical Perspective" by Stan Harstine is found. The author begins with a remark that the subject is difficult because of the two obstacles which are: 1) the close relationship between Jesus and God and 2) the study of characterization itself. The theory of characterization deals with three elements of character: mimetic, thematic and synthetic, each of which consists of dimensions and functions. The question that Harstine wants to answer is: "What rhetorical role does the character of God provide?" Character mimetic dimensions of God/Father are the following four: he is the one who sends, loves, gives, speaks (commands and teaches), while mimetic function of God is being the source of life. Thematic dimensions are God as authority, creative artist and goal for living. Thematic functions reinforce these three traits. Synthetic dimension (artificial component in a character) is minimized so it is not analyzed further. Finally, it is stated that the rhetorical function of the character of God is twofold. Firstly, it is an authentication of Jesus' teaching and linking him with God. Second element is to shape the audience's notion of God. The conclusion is that the character of God amplifies the rhetorical purpose of the Gospel (John 20:31).

Sherri Brown in "John the Baptist: Witness and Embodiment of the Prologue in the Gospel of John" (pp. 147-164) sees the Prologue as a synthesis of events to

come and John as a witness to perfect faith and the bridge from the Prologue to the body of the Gospel. She focuses on key-appearances of John, using different and confusing delimitations: 1:1-18; 1:19-37, then 1:19-42; 3:22-42 (*sic!*), later 3:22-36. The texts are analyzed and it is quite a typical exegesis. The Baptist is the embodiment of the Prologue because he provides crucial information about Jesus.

Third practical contribution – and a very insightful one – by Craig R. Koester is entitled “Theological Complexity and the Characterization of Nicodemus in John’s Gospel” (pp. 165-181). The author gives Culpepper’s definition of characterization and states that major feature of Johannine characters is their relationship to Jesus. The Fourth Gospel is known for its dualism. Yet the character of Nicodemus is ambiguous, but so are the other characters. In 3:1-21 Nicodemus is depicted as an individual Jew, a group representative and a member of human race. Jesus discloses his lack of understanding, whereas in 7:50-51 it is Nicodemus who exposes Pharisees’ ignorance of the law and lack of knowledge. During the burial of Jesus (19:38-42) Nicodemus does what is true as Mary did earlier (12:1-8, cf. 3:21). He acts during day (cf. 9:4) and gives glory to Jesus. His barriers show the need for God’s action. Nicodemus is not so much a model believer; rather his role is that through him readers can see how God works.

“The Woman of Samaria: Her Characterization, Narrative and Theological Significance” (pp. 182-196) is a point of interest for Mary L. Coloe. She argues that the Samaritan woman plays an important role in conveying the author’s ideological point of view. When presenting the pericope Coloe uses the Jewish extrabiblical and Targumic traditions, and information about contemporary customs. The narrative context of the passage shows John the Baptist as the friend of the bridegroom (3:29) and Jesus as the bridegroom (2:1-12) and the temple (1:14; 2:21). These themes are present in chapter four of the Gospel, since Jesus sits on the well as the temple of God and is the (seventh) bridegroom of Israel. He is also the covenant God (*ego eimi*). In order to comprehend the full meaning of the passage, one should use the text from Ezekiel 37:16-17.21-22.26-27, because it is enacted in John 4. In chapters 1-3 Jesus was depicted 1–3 was depicted as the bridegroom and the temple for the Jews, while in chap. 4 – for everyone.

Chapter 12 is titled “Martha and Mary: Levels of Characterization in Luke and John” (pp. 197-220). Dorothy A. Lee notices that because Gospel’s characters are non-fictional, they belong to four worlds of their characterization: the narrative world of the text, the symbolic world of the text, the historical world behind the text and the world of reception, i.e. the world before the text. In the narrative world the picture of Martha is consistent. She is engaged in service, confident, and blunt. Her faith is growing but limited, even more in the Lucan account. Mary also has similar portraits in both Gospels. She is a quiet and

devout disciple of Jesus and has deeper level of awareness than others. The representative role that the sisters play is their pointing to Jesus who possesses divine power over life and death. Martha stands for the disciple who struggles with death in the light of faith, whose faith is open to development (John) and whose knowledge and love are limited (Luke). Mary in both Gospels symbolizes unqualified faith and love of the true disciple. Together they represent two ways in which the community confesses its faith: in word (Martha) and in action (Mary). Martha is elder, because she welcomes Jesus and is usually mentioned first. She has the characteristics of the eldest siblings according to the psychological birth order theory, while Mary seems to be the youngest. The last paragraph gives a few examples of *Wirkungsgeschichte*: three Renaissance paintings, a Byzantine hymn and a description of iconic tradition.

David R. Beck, author of the study on anonymity and discipleship in the Johannine Gospel (Brill 1997), wrote “‘Whom Jesus Loved’: Anonymity and Identity. Belief and Witness in the Fourth Gospel” (pp. 221-239). He chooses to call the character by the relative clause used in the Gospel ‘whom Jesus loved’ although he is usually referred to as ‘the Beloved Disciple’ which resembles a proper name. The reason he is anonymous is because there is only One person in the Gospel whose name is prominent and who is God and the Word made flesh. Beck presents four undisputed appearances of the disciple whom Jesus loved, which are made in chapters 13, 19, 20 and 21. He is also one of the disciples mentioned in 1:35 and possibly present in the high priest’s courtyard (chap. 18). The disciple was a historical figure but in the narrative he serves as an ideal follower of Jesus who has genuine faith. Moreover, his witness is a basis for the entire story of Jesus and its veracity is vital.

The last one, and at the same time second article by Cornelis Benemma in this volume, is “The Character of Pilate in the Gospel of John” (pp. 240-253). Rome’s prefect is analyzed in three aspects. The first phase, presented in paragraphs II and IV, is a study of the character in text and context. In John 18–19 Pilate taunts Jews and flaunts his authority. According to Josephus and Philo Pilate did not like or understand Jesus. In the four conflicts with the Jews that are described, he is presented as a competent but provoking governor. This is similar to John’s and Mark’s view, while unlike the other Synoptic Gospels’. The second aspect is done in section III. It is an analysis and classification along three continua: complexity, development and inner life. Pilate turns out to be one of the most complex character of the Johannine Gospel. He is cruel, calculating, provocative and afraid. There is some development in his character and a few insights in his inner life. Therefore he can be classified “as being beyond personality, towards an individual”. When evaluating Pilate Benemma differs from the majority of scholars who see him as a weak and indecisive character.

He is strong but finally gives in. His response to Jesus is inadequate. The role in the plot of the Gospel he plays is moving it to its climax. Finally, his representative value for today is assessed. He stands for / exemplifies authorities who compromise truth and justice in order to secure their career.

The publication is provided with a twenty-seven-page bibliography and an index of authors cited (pp. 283-288). As a whole the book is an example of commendable scholarly work. Although it is not a comprehensive and exhaustive study, the authors reached their aim – it is definitely an important contribution to the subject of characters and characterization. On the side of drawbacks, one would expect more connection between the two sections, i.e. it would be instructive to see the theory put in practice, which is done only partially.