

Steven A. Hunt – D. Francois Tolmie – Ruben Zimmermann (eds.), *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (WUNT 314; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2013). Pp. xvii + 724. €194. ISBN 978-3-16-152784-5

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The *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel* is a truly global endeavor. Three Professors specializing in the area of New Testament from three different continents decided to cooperate in this project: Steven A. Hunt (Gordon College, Massachusetts, USA), D. Francois Tolmie (University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa), and Ruben Zimmermann (Johannes Gutenberg-University, Mainz, Germany). As editors, they compiled character studies to seventy figures in the Gospel of John. The stated purpose of their work is “to offer a comprehensive narrative-critical study of nearly every character Jesus (or, in some cases, only the reader) encounters in the narrative world of the Fourth Gospel” (xi). The editors did not force a specific method upon the authors, but insisted on strictly literary approach. Although this strategy resulted in a wide range of methods used by the contributors, it excluded studies along the historical lines. This well-known limitation is acknowledged by Christopher Skinner, who virtually simultaneously published his work on comparable subject as editor of *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (LNTS 461; London: T&T Clark 2013). We learn in the foreword that creators of both projects were not oblivious to each other, which makes it quite extraordinary that such similar books came out at the same time.

The structure of this volume contains: Foreword, An Introduction to Character and Characterization in John and Related New Testament Literature, Table on the Characters in the Fourth Gospel, and 62 articles by 44 biblical scholars on nearly all characters in the Gospel of John in the order of their first appearance in the text. The book ends with the list of contributors and invaluable indexes of references, modern authors, and subjects.

The introduction written by the editors offers the necessary theoretical background on approaches to character studies. *First*, an overview is given of the history of research on how characters are interpreted in literature: what is the relationship between character and action/plot; how should characters be treated

(as people or words); and what is their possible classification (“flat” or “round”). This brief outline incorporates major literary approaches (structuralist, semiotic, and rhetorical) and includes important authors such as Aristotle, Edward M. Forster, Vladimir Propp, W.J. Harvey, Algirdas J. Greimas, Seymour Chatman, Uri Margolin, and Fotis Jannidis. *Second*, the general theory previously introduced is applied to Biblical Studies exemplified by the following authors: Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Meir Sternberg, and others. *Third*, the state of research is given on the character studies in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, and *finally* on the Gospel of John. The introduction is clear and compact, but regrettably it is organized as a chronological survey of authors. It would be more useful for the reader if it was the ideas that were shown in their historical development.

The articles contained in the book are too numerous for a modest review. For this reason, I have chosen seven representative ones that fall into three groups describing individual, corporate, and minor characters.

For the *first group* I have chosen articles about John the Baptist, Andrew, and Nathanael. My selection begins with a paper by Catrin H. Williams entitled *John (the Baptist): The Witness on the Threshold*. Acknowledging Baptist’s originality in the Fourth Gospel, the author is interested in pinpointing John’s character portrait. She is not convinced that the Baptist can be justifiably restricted into the classic Edward M. Forster’s category as a “flat” character and criticizes Cornelis Bennema on account of his exclusive focus on John’s character traits. Hence, she proposes a method of combining the results of two approaches: the reconstruction of the character in light of the given traits, and the analysis of “characterization” – author’s techniques of constructing a character. This method allows Williams to enhance the description of John as a key witness to Jesus by adding a unique feature – his role as a bridge, an in-between figure, a point of transition between the old and the new. The most interesting part of Williams’ very thorough argumentation is her use of the theory of focalization to show how the Evangelist redirects attention from the Baptist to Jesus.

The next individual character under investigation is Andrew. Although he is the first named disciple of Jesus, there is not much material in the Gospel about this figure. The difficult task of using the literary approach in this limited circumstance was undertaken by Martinus C. de Boer – Emeritus Professor of New Testament in Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam. His article is entitled *Andrew: The First Link in the Chain*. This analysis of Andrew seems to be written by its author as an example of limitations implied by the narrative methodology alone. De Boer writes: “A narrative-critical approach combined with attention to the social, cultural, and religious historical setting of the Gospel is required”. Nevertheless, the author tries to be true to the editorial requirements and follows the methodology described by R. Alan Culpepper in the classic *Anatomy of the*

Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design. He is interested in answering the following questions: “How is Andrew described?”, “What does he do and say?”, and “What is his function in the story?”. The analysis of four passages (1:35-42; 1:43-51; 6:1-14; 12:20-26) leads de Boer to the conclusion that Andrew is a “flat” character. His main trait is the ability to find and bring people to Jesus and such is his role in the Gospel. He functions as the first link in the chain of disciples. Although this conclusion seems to be evident, the word “chain” is problematic. It implies that each subsequent disciple was an apostle to the next, who in turn became the apostle to another one. This is clearly not the case with Peter and not probable with Philip. The author did not take into account the fourth mode of characterization found in Culpepper’s work: “How characters react to each other?” Perhaps examining these interactions in their wider context would shed more light into the difficulties with describing the exact function of Andrew in the narrative. Although the article generally follows the narrative approach, de Boer is not enslaved by it. In fact, one of the most interesting fragments of his work is a detailed analysis of Bultmann’s idea that Andrew is the subject of the word εὐρίσκει in v. 43 and hence it is Andrew, who finds Philip, not Jesus. Bultmann’s analysis clearly belongs to the diachronic realm, but its results are indispensable in the narrative approach. It is a vivid illustration of de Boer’s underlying thought that synchronic view cannot stand on its own.

The article entitled *Nathanael: Under the Fig Tree on the Fourth Day* is the last from the group describing individual characters to be presented in this review. Its author, Steven A. Hunt, is a Professor of New Testament in Gordon College (Massachusetts, USA) and one of three editors of this book. In his method he focuses on the relationship between Nathanael and other characters in the first chapter of John, namely Andrew, Simon, and Philip. This approach complements the method used in the previously presented article by de Boer, who omitted this aspect. After basic characterization of Nathanael and brief analysis of John 1:19-51 in the context of Genesis’ “first week”, Hunt proceeds with a structural observation of parallelism between day three and four in the narrative. Using this structure, he compares Simon and Nathanael as the last disciples in each day. The results of this juxtaposition are surprisingly fruitful, since entirely passive Simon appears to be in complete opposition to Nathanael – the active, responsive, engaging interlocutor of Jesus, who receives the highest commendation as the “true Israelite”. Hunt makes the most of this disparity by delighting the reader with a list of stimulating entailments. Although the article could well end here, its author goes beyond the narrative approach and clarifies selected phrases in the text almost as an aside under the subtitle “Latent Possibilities: Nazareth, the Branch, and Nathanael Under the Fig Tree”. This section is an interesting analysis of the appearance of “Nazareth” and “Nazarene” that

foreshadows and prepares the resolution of the kingship motif culminating in the inscription on the cross “Jesus *the Nazarene*, the King of the Jews” in 19:19. Furthermore, the mysterious “under the fig tree” in 1:48, 50 is shown to have kingship connections through intertextual parallels in Zech 3:1-10. Highlighting these kingship motifs is in line with the recent Johannine scholarship, e.i.: Beth M. Stovell, *Mapping Metaphorical Discourse in the Fourth Gospel*. John’s Eternal King (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2012).

The *second group* of articles represents analyses of corporate characters, who speak and act as one, although they comprise an assembly. The first article by Sherri Brown is entitled *The Priests and Levites: Identity and Politics in the Search for a Messiah*. Its author is an Assistant Professor at the Niagara University, USA – a Catholic institution in the Vincentian tradition. The “priests and Levites” appear only on the first day of John the Baptist’s public appearance (1:19-28). Hence, Brown divides the article into two sections. The first one provides a detailed narrative analysis of the fragment, while the second one shows the narrative force of this group in the plot. In the first section, the author focuses on the dialog between John the Baptist and the priests and Levites “sent from Jerusalem” (v. 19). She demonstrates how their mission, conferred upon them by the religious establishment, limits their ability to dialog with the Baptist. They are not interested in the question of John’s true identity, but rather “with an answer that fits within the political categories their ‘senders’ from Jerusalem expect”. The second section gives the reader a brief paradigm of traits, which enable the author to classify the priests and Levites as corporate character, neither complex nor developed. In the Greimas’ actantial model they function as “senders” who advance the plot and clarify John the Baptist’s role as the witness sent from God to testify to the coming of Jesus Christ. Brown, like the previous authors, does not limit herself to narrative approach. One of the most interesting fragments of the article is the discussion of v. 24: “and they have been sent from the Pharisees”. The historical problem of the unlikely alliance of the priests and Levites with the Pharisees has been shown to cause various scholarly interpretations including attempts to reconstruct the Gospel’s literary prehistory (e.i. Bultmann). Brown concludes that the problem is best answered narratively, as the connection of the Pharisees with the Jerusalem establishment serves to prepare the ground for their later opposition to Jesus and his mission. This conclusion is a welcome surprise that in some cases the synchronic reading alone solves difficulties better than the recourse to diachronic speculations.

An interesting methodological problem is presented in the second article describing corporate characters: “The Galileans: Interpretive Possibilities and the Limits of Narrative Critical Approaches” written by Andy M. Reimer – Sessional Lecturer in St. Mary’s University College. The problem in determining

a distinct characterization of the Galileans has its root in difficulties concerning the question: What is the knowledge of the implied reader about this group of people? The author convincingly argues that there is not enough information in the fourth Gospel itself to cast the Galileans into a predominantly negative or positive role. Both interpretations are possible and well represented by known exegetes. If we extend the implied reader's background knowledge of the story of Jesus to other Gospels (especially Mark's Gospel), then the interpretive possibilities multiply. Reimer concludes his analysis with the view that critical narrative reading leaves us with methodological indeterminacy similar to the one already debated by John A. Darr and David B. Gowler on the characterization of the Pharisees in the Book of Acts in the early 1990-ties. Perhaps a more optimistic perspective could be shown by pointing out that the problem of the Pharisees in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts has already been solved by combining the historical and narrative approaches in the monograph written by Waldemar Rakocy: *Obraz i funkcja faryzeuszy w dziele Łukaszowym (Łk-Dz). Studium literacko-teologiczne [Image and Function of the Pharisees in the Lukan Work (Luke-Acts). Literary-Theological Studies]*, Lublin: RW KUL 2000.

The *third group* of articles includes texts about minor characters, which are often overlooked in the commentaries as unimportant. One such character is a boy analyzed by Dieter T. Roth (wiss. Mitarbeiter, Protestant Faculty of Theology, Johannes Gutenberg-University of Mainz and Research Associate of the University of Pretoria) in the article "The Boy with Loaves and Fish: Picnic, Plot, and Pattern". The author points out that the character of the boy appearing in 6:9 is certainly underdeveloped from the perspective of R. Alan Culpepper's classic four criteria given in the *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*. Nevertheless, a plot analysis of the miraculous feeding in John according to the quinary scheme (as outlined by D. Marguerat – Y. Bourquin, *How to Read Bible Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Criticism*) shows that the boy is brought into the scene in the *transformation* part of the plot. Having been introduced to Jesus by Andrew (who already brought Simon to Jesus in 1:41-42), the boy plays a decisive role in the narrative, since without his presence the miracle could not be performed by Jesus in its current form. From the perspective of the actantial model promoted by A. J. Greimas, the boy embodies the "helper", who enables the transition from the inability to buy enough bread to the miraculous abundance of food. Furthermore, Dieter Roth explores possible intertextual shaping of the analyzed character and finds connections with the miraculous feeding performed by Elisha in 2 Kgs 4:42-44, where Elisha's servant is also called παιδάριον in LXX 2 Kgs 4:38, 41, as well as patterns and themes within the fourth Gospel relating to "bread" and "fish" (J 6:26-27, 32; 21:9, 13). Although the results of this study are not very innovative,

they do show that a “minor character” in a narrative does not have to be “insignificant”.

Another minor character analyzed in the reviewed book is Barabbas, who appears only twice in the Gospel of John in verse 18:40. David L. Mathewson – an Associate Professor of New Testament in Denver Seminary – wrote an article entitled “Barabbas: A Foil for Jesus, the Jewish Leadership, and Pilate”, which applies insights from modern linguistics to specify the function of Barabbas within the discourse. The first part of the article identifies Barabbas as the minor character using argumentation from the area of discourse and grammatical analysis. In the second part, Mathewson focuses on the narrative function of the analyzed character, who seems to act as a foil for the other major plot participants. The first one of them is Jesus, with whom Barabbas contrasts to underscore the irony between the release of the guilty insurrectionist and murderer (ληστής) in exchange for the innocent shepherd of the people (cf. J 10:1, 8). The second one is the Jewish leadership, for whom Barabbas gives an “opportunity” to declare the innocence of a criminal and thus expose the truth about their opposition toward Jesus. Thirdly, Barabbas acts as a foil for Pilate, who releases the guilty in place of the innocent and in this way makes a mockery of justice. The author of this concise article clearly demonstrates that Barabbas as a minor character provides a powerful rhetorical effect by allowing the reader to see in full view the true motivation of characters taking part in Jesus’ trial.

In general evaluation of the presented article collection, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of the narrative-critical approach imposed on the authors by the editors. These limitations were acknowledged by many individual contributors, who suggested adding a more balanced approach of the historical-critical method. Furthermore, the lack of common and uniform methodology among contributors causes difficulties in comparing the individual articles with each other to reach more synthetic conclusions. This limitation was already recognized and overcome by Cornelis Benemna in his book *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2009). Looking at the positive aspects of this book it must be noted that the presented articles provide an excellent overview of literary methods used in practice and provide a good reference point for analyzing the role of specific characters within the chosen Gospel fragment. For these reasons alone, it might be a useful position to have on the shelf.