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978-0-521-47765-9 - John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel

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Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

One of the aims of this book is to show that the gospel of John is a *multi-story* phenomenon calling for a multi-disciplinary narrative methodology. We cannot properly appreciate John's storytelling art unless we are prepared to expose his story to a comprehensive exegetical approach which has room for historical as well as literary questions. In looking at narrative criticism in part I, I will expose the weaknesses in two current extremes in biblical criticism: first of all, the recent anti-historical bias of text-immanent, literary analysis of biblical texts; secondly, the largely anti-aesthetic bias of traditional, historical-critical methods. In the first half I proceed to construct a method which looks at Johannine narrative at the level of *text, context and pre-text*; that is to say, the surface level of the narrative, the social context of the narrative, and the historical reference, sources and tradition of the narrative. My rationale for joining these disciplines is not merely the desire to reconcile what have hitherto been estranged bed-fellows. The narrative form itself cries out for such a quasi-metaphorical conjunction. As I will show throughout this work, questions surrounding the narrative form are not asked in literary faculties alone: they are also asked by philosophers of history such as W. B. Gallie, and social ethicists such as S. Hauerwas. What this means is that a narrative criticism which is only concerned with the literary issues of characterization, plot and structure seriously restricts the functions of narrative. Narratives are crucial not only for aesthetic purposes but also for the social reconstruction of history. One of the contributions of this book is that it highlights the philosophical grounds for integrating the synchronic and diachronic aspects of biblical criticism.

Perhaps the one adjective which I would use to describe this book is 'integrative'. First, in chapter 1 I integrate literary and theological questions. By insisting that narrative devices are used for rhetorical and Christological purposes, my method of narrative criticism will

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open up the possibility of assessing Johannine theology from a literary-critical perspective. Secondly, in chapter 2 I integrate structuralism and historical criticism. By radically adapting structuralist narratology, I will show how narrative critics can identify the deep, generic structures which are part of the grammar of the gospel writer's culture. Thirdly, in chapter 3, I integrate literary and sociological areas of enquiry by showing how the narrative form is used by social groups in the construction of communal identity. By integrating socio-redaction criticism with narrative criticism, I will open up the possibility of examining the story of John as a code determining community values. Fourthly, in chapter 4 I integrate literary and historical methods by pointing out the importance of the narrative form for the social reconstruction of history. For too long, German Johannine scholars have presupposed that the fourth gospel cannot be both poetic and historical. F. C. Baur (1847), Bruno Bauer (1846), J. Wellhausen (1908), E. Schwartz (1907), E. Hirsch (1936) and H. Windisch (1923) all insisted that John's gospel could not be history because John was a creative poet. In this book I will expose the fallacy of this presupposition. The gospel of John is poetic history: it is a creative redescription of historical tradition in which the concrete reality of Jesus' life is by no means destroyed. By integrating aesthetic and historical criticism, I will open up the possibility of travelling from the narrative of Jesus' experience, through the narrative sources, to the narrative-shaped gospel.

In the final analysis, it is by the fruits of a new method that we can know its usefulness. In this book, the application of this new form of narrative criticism to John's gospel and its passion narrative yields some interesting results. Some of the innovative discoveries in part II are the following: the discovery in John 18.1–27 of the narrative echo effects with the Good Shepherd *παρουσία* (10.1–18); the discovery of Dionysiac echoes in John's story as a whole, and particularly in the binding of Jesus (John 18.12ff.), the dialogue with Pilate (18.28ff.) and the pathos of Jesus' crucifixion (19.16ff.); the discovery of the sociological significance of John's passion narrative, specifically the adoption scenario in 19.25–7; the discovery, finally, of the importance of time-shapes in John's reconstruction of Jesus' history in John 18–19. I hope it will now be seen, especially by British scholars (who have been slow to embrace the new literary approaches to the Bible), that narrative criticism provides a potentially rich resource for those who wish to approach the fourth gospel as both literature and history.

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PART I

**THE METHOD OF NARRATIVE CRITICISM
AND THE GOSPEL OF JOHN**

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**THE PRACTICAL CRITICISM OF JOHN'S
NARRATIVE****The emergence of narrative criticism**

Until the late 1970s, the traditional methods for the study of the gospels and Acts were form criticism, source criticism, historical criticism, tradition history, redaction criticism, and textual criticism. Broadly speaking, these methods were concerned to answer the following questions: (1) What forms of material were available to the evangelists, and how were they used in the earliest church? (form criticism). (2) What sources were available to the evangelists when they wrote their gospels? (source criticism). (3) How much do the gospels tell us about Jesus and about the churches for which they were written? (historical criticism). (4) How much did the words and works of Jesus change during the years before the gospels were composed? (tradition history). (5) What theological and sociological purposes lie behind the evangelist's selection and expression of Jesus material in the gospels? (redaction criticism), and (6) What variations exist in the manuscripts of the gospel texts, and which has the greatest claim to be correct? (textual criticism). In other words, traditional methods of interpretation were more concerned with what lay behind NT narratives than with their form and their literary, artistic features. Although most of these methods comprised meticulous exegesis of NT narrative, none of them sought to answer the question, 'What artistry is there in these NT stories?'

A change began to occur most noticeably in the 1980s, when two books were published on *Mark as Story* (Rhoads and Michie, 1982; Best, 1983); one on *Matthew as Story* (Kingsbury, 1986), one on *The Narrative Unity of Luke--Acts* (Tannehill, 1986), and one on *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Culpepper, 1983). Each of these works, and a number of lesser-known books and articles (see references), took up the challenge of looking at the final form of the gospels and Acts in order to highlight those narrative dynamics which traditional methods had neglected. The history behind this paradigm shift has been well documented, especially in Stephen Moore's

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Literary Criticism and the Gospels (1989). It is now clear that the groundwork for NT narrative criticism was begun by Eric Auerbach, who, in 1953, published an influential book on realism in narrative called *Mimesis*. His second chapter, in which he praised the extraordinary realism of the narrative in Mark, caused something of an awakening in biblical studies. In 1964, Amos Wilder published his book *Early Christian Rhetoric*, and included an important chapter on the gospels as story. In 1970, William Beardslee also highlighted the narrative form of the gospels in his *Literary Criticism of the New Testament*. In 1972, Norman Perrin advocated a greater interest in the narrative dynamics of the NT in a widely read paper entitled 'The Evangelist as Author'. In 1978, Norman Petersen published his *Literary Criticism for New Testament Critics* and Edgar McKnight his *Meaning in Texts*, both concerned with narrative hermeneutics in connection with the gospels and Acts. In 1979, Frank Kermode published a book on narrative hermeneutics called *The Genesis of Secrecy* which used Mark as its principal sample-text. With these works published, the stage was well and truly set for the ferment of narrative approaches to the NT. A brief summary of the major contributions now follows.

The gospel of Mark

The gospel which attracted nearly all of the initial attention of emerging narrative critics was Mark, and the first book to devote itself to a full-length study of its narrative was Rhoads and Michie's *Mark as Story* (1982), subtitled *An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*. In this work, two American scholars combined to focus on the final form of the text as narrative rather than on its hypothesized prehistory. The two authors stated that their aim was a literary rather than an historical one. On its own, such a comment might have been confusing for two reasons: first because the phrase 'literary criticism' had been a synonym for source criticism in NT studies (the very opposite of what Rhoads and Michie intended); secondly, because the very idea that the gospels and Acts might in some sense be literature had been questioned by form critics such as Martin Dibelius from the 1920s. However, it is clear from an article published in the same year entitled 'Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark' that the authors preferred their method to be called narrative rather than literary criticism (Rhoads, 1982: 411–12). This was a sensible move, because literary criticism implies that the authors regard the gospels as

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literature (which is by no means obvious), whilst narrative criticism is a much safer term (no one doubts that the gospels are narratives). The authors brought out the narrative qualities of Mark by providing a new translation of the gospel and by analysing narrative qualities, such as the narrator, narrative settings, plot and characterization. In conclusion, both Rhoads and Michie stated that 'the author of Mark's Gospel tells a dynamic story and has woven the tale so as to create powerful effects on the reader' (p. 108).

In 1983, the British scholar Ernest Best published his *Mark: The Gospel as Story*. Best pointed out in his first chapter that traditional scholarship had used Mark as a quarry for information about a Christian community. Now, however, scholars had begun to recognize that books have an existence of their own once they are written. Consequently, 'discussion on Mark has turned around once again and the Gospel is now viewed as a whole' (p. 2). Best's argument throughout his book is that the pre-Markan material which was eventually incorporated into the second gospel possessed no overall coherence. Miracle stories, parables, sayings all came to the author from independent streams of tradition. They were not already episodes in a larger narrative totality. What the author achieved when he transformed oral traditions into a written gospel was the creation of a plot. As Best puts it, 'it is the "plot" which holds Mark together' (p. 108). The plot forms the cement which links together all the material selected by the author (p. 100). The items of traditions are like pearls, but the plot which Mark establishes is the connecting thread of purpose which links these pearls into a unified, narrative Christology (p. 112). Mark is therefore best described as narrative, 'though the narrative is not put forward as fiction' (p. 141). It is not fictional narrative, because the author did not feel free to alter or create as he liked. 'There is positive evidence that he had a real respect for the tradition and preserved much of its detail faithfully' (p. 118).

The gospel of Matthew

The year 1986 saw the publication of *Matthew as Story* by the American scholar Jack Dean Kingsbury. Kingsbury began by stating that his book was 'a study in literary, or narrative criticism' and that it was 'one of the first such books on Matthew to be written' (p. vii). His aim was 'to explore the world of Matthew's thought with an eye to the flow (plot) of the gospel-story that is being told' (p. vii). His method is a 'product of literary criticism', and he carries out his

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investigation 'in terms of categories that literary-theorists employ in their investigation of works such as the novel' (p. vii). Thus Kingsbury uses Seymour Chatman's communicational theory of narrative and E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* and applies their terminology to the gospel of Matthew (p. 10). Consequently, we have sections on events, characters, settings, the implied author, the narrator, the point of view, the implied reader, and structure. All these qualities are analysed as aspects of Matthew's unified narrative. There is little attention to historical questions, because 'when one reads the Matthean narrative, one temporarily takes leave of one's familiar world of reality and enters into another world that is autonomous in its own right' (p. 2). Some attention is given to the community for which the gospel was written, and this is done by taking the implied reader in Matthew's story as an index of the real readers (p. 120). In his dependence on Seymour Chatman and modern theorists of the novel (such as E. M. Forster), Kingsbury was following Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1983), as we shall see in a moment. The same criticisms which we shall make of Culpepper's literary approach to John (that it treats the gospel as an a-historical novel) can also be directed against Kingsbury's work.

Luke–Acts

Luke–Acts had already been exposed to a number of literary studies before 1986, which saw the publication of the first volume of Robert Tannehill's *Narrative Unity of Luke–Acts*. Robert Tannehill's narrative-critical articles on the Synoptic gospels and Acts had been consistently perceptive before the publication of this work. Particularly interesting had been his 'Disciples in Mark' (1977) and his 'Gospel of Mark as Narrative Christology' (1979). Now, after a preparatory article entitled 'The Composition of Acts 3–5: Narrative Development and Echo Effect' (1984), Tannehill turned his attention to the narrative of Luke–Acts. He began with the remark that 'Luke–Acts ... was written by an author of literary skill and rich imagination who had a complex vision of the significance of Jesus Christ and of the mission in which he is the central figure' (p. 1). Luke–Acts is therefore a 'unified literary work of two volumes' (p. 1). Tannehill's claim is that traditional methods of biblical criticism lack the leading concepts which enable scholars to see how a narrative like Luke–Acts achieves unity. However, 'the recent development of narrative criticism ... opens new opportunities' (p. 1), and helps us

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to identify the author's disclosures of his overarching purpose. The key concept Tannehill uses is that of narrative 'echo effects'. These are the internal connections between different parts of the narrative. As Tannehill puts it, 'Themes will be developed, dropped, then presented again. Characters and actions may echo characters and actions in another part of the story, as well as characters and actions of the scriptural story which preceded Luke–Acts' (p. 3). Although Tannehill calls his method literary criticism without arguing for the literary status of Luke–Acts, his work is an interesting example of how to examine the gospels as story, and we shall be employing some of his leading concepts in our narrative criticism of John.

The gospel of John

What examples do we have of narrative studies of the fourth gospel? There have been a number of attempts to open up the literary qualities of the fourth gospel throughout this century. Hitchcock looked at the dramatic qualities of John in 1923, as did Bowen (1930), Connick (1948), Martyn (first edition, 1968), Smalley (1978), Flanagan (1981), Domeris (1983) and others (such as Strachan and Charnwood). Other scholars have highlighted some of the literary features of the gospel, such as Windisch (1923 – see introduction), Muilenburg (1932), Deeks (1968), Wead (1970), Talbert (1970), Newman (1975) and de Jonge (1977). The 1980s have seen a blossoming of such approaches to John by South African scholars such as Domeris (1983), Du Rand (1985) and Kotzé (1985), and by American scholars such as Gibling (1980), Crossan (1980), Cahill (1982), Webster (1982), Phillips (1983), Nicholson (1983), Hartman (1984), Duke (1985), O'Day (1986), Malina (1985) and Staley (1988).

By far the most influential of these has been Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1983). Culpepper's best-known work of Johannine scholarship before this was his *Johannine School* (1975), which was an attempt to reconstruct through the Johannine literature the school of writers responsible for the composition of John. Culpepper's *Anatomy* could not have been more different. Instead of a work of historical reconstruction, *Anatomy* was a study in the narrative world of the fourth gospel. Indeed, Culpepper almost seemed to reject his earlier work when he criticized Johannine scholars in general for treating John as a window on to the history of the Johannine community as opposed to 'the literary creation of the evangelist' (p. 4). John, in Culpepper's eyes, is 'novelistic, realistic

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narrative' (p. 8), and it should be read primarily as story and not as history. Thus, questions concerning sources and origins are set aside because 'the experience of reading the text is more important than understanding the process of its composition' (p. 5). What is required instead is a method for appreciating the fourth gospel as a unified narrative. As in the case of Kingsbury's later book on Matthew, Culpepper uses Seymour Chatman's communicational model of narrative as his starting-point (p. 6).

One understands the model as follows: a narrative presupposes a storyteller, a story and an audience. Between the author and the reader stands the text of this story. An important distinction must then be made between the real author and the real reader, on the one hand, and then between these two entities and their counterparts in the narrative itself (the implied author and the implied reader). The implied author is the author suggested by the choice and the arrangement of material, the author who is inferred from the internal narrative dynamics. This implied author may well be different in character from the actual author, just as the inferred or implied reader may be different from the real reader. Altogether, the reader's response is shaped and directed by characterization (the way in which the characters in the story are depicted), by narrative settings, plot (the selection and organization of material into a chronological unity), and implicit commentary (the means used by the narrator to communicate indirectly with the reader, including irony and symbolism). It is these narrative elements which establish the communication between author and reader: that is why Culpepper's book focusses on point of view, narrative time, plot, characters, implicit commentary and the implied reader in John's story (categories hitherto neglected in Johannine studies). It is precisely through these narrative elements that the gospel communicates its confessed aim of moving the reader to new insights and to faith in Jesus as the Son of God (John 20.31).

Culpepper's study is a significant methodological experiment and an extremely valuable contribution to Johannine studies. Above all, it has helped scholars to rediscover the unified story of a gospel whose narrative unity had suffered greatly at the hands of displacement theorists like Rudolf Bultmann. However, the value judgement Culpepper passes on John's story, that it is 'magnificent but flawed' (p. 231), could really be passed on his own book. For example, Culpepper takes it too much for granted that a gospel can be studied as if it were a novel. The major theorists on whom he (and Kingsbury

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later) depends are all students of modern fiction (E.M. Forster, Gerard Genette and Seymour Chatman in particular), but it is a moot point whether their novel-based models are applicable in the context of first-century narratives. Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis* is partly responsible here: by showing how 'realistic' or novel-like Mark was, he unwittingly encouraged a number of biblical scholars to treat the gospels as novels. Also to blame is what Scholes and Kellogg have described as the modern idolatry of the novel form (1966, p. 8). So, whilst Culpepper is not guilty of calling gospel narratives primitive literature, it needs to be stated that the sophistications of gospel narrative are quite different from the subtleties of modern novels. Gospel narratives share in the subtleties of ancient Hebrew and Graeco-Roman narratives, not in the more self-conscious subtleties of modern novels. Put simply, they are closer to Homer's *Odyssey* than they are to Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is against the background of the Old Testament and Graeco-Roman narrative that Johannine narrative should be judged, and not against the background of the modern novel. As it stands, Culpepper's method is fundamentally anachronistic.

A related problem with Culpepper's work centres on his neglect of the historical dimension of John's story. He begins his book by stressing that he is not against historical criticism, and yet the emphasis is on John as fiction and on the plea for John not to be used as a window on to the Johannine community (pp. 3–5). However, the recent so-called 'new look' at John's gospel has re-emphasized the value of its historical traditions, and scholarship from J.L. Martyn's *History and Theology* (first edition, 1968) onwards has mainly devoted itself to identifying community history within the fourth gospel. Even though Culpepper may not be using the word fiction to connote invention and falsehood, the general approach of his book does tend to obscure the value of the gospel as narrative history and as community narrative. As far as historicity is concerned, the reason for this lies in his dependence on Frank Kermode's 1979 narrative analysis of Mark, which began the trend of regarding the gospels as fictional novels. As for Culpepper's neglect of the community dimension, this may derive from the allegorizing tendencies of various community reconstructionists, but it probably also derives from Culpepper's New critical bias. Like New criticism, his method is text-immanent; that is, it bypasses extrinsic, historical and socio-logical factors in the task of literary interpretation. The problem here is that biblical narrative is a functional structure: it is social discourse