

1 Introduction

'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players' — W. Shakespeare

People are interested in people and like to hear their stories. The appeal of a good novel, movie or biography is that it draws one into the story so that we identify with one or more of the characters. Some authors write simply to entertain readers, while others write in order to persuade their readers of a particular viewpoint. The author of John's gospel falls in the latter category.¹ John explicitly states his purpose in 20:30–31:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

In order to accomplish this purpose John deliberately puts on the stage various characters that interact with Jesus, producing an array of belief-responses. This book too has a specific purpose: to present the Johannine characters, especially their responses to Jesus, in order to challenge readers to evaluate their stance regarding Jesus.

Having studied the Gospel of John in recent years, I recognize the relevance and universality of John's appeal for his readers on the subject of Jesus. For John, Jesus is the central figure in human history who came into the world to provide divine, everlasting life and to reveal God (cf. 1:1–18). John 1:4 states that 'in him was life', and the rest of the gospel substantiates this claim. Jesus is the protagonist in John's story and various characters interact with him. Since peoples' response to Jesus is crucial we must study these characters. This book is the first full-length treatment of all the Johannine characters who encounter Jesus.

There is another important rationale for this book. In the last thirty years there has been an increased interest in the Bible as literature and story. Literary methods have been applied to John's gospel mainly in the form of narrative criticism and reader-response criticism and have proven fruitful. John's gospel, then, is the story of Jesus Christ – a story with a plot, events

¹ We contend that the author of this gospel is the Beloved Disciple, whom we tentatively identify as John the son of Zebedee (see ch. 21).

and characters. While much has been written on events and on the logical or causal sequence of events called 'plot', character appears to be the neglected child. There is no comprehensive theory of character in either literary theory or biblical criticism, and therefore no consensus amongst scholars on how to analyse and classify characters. Elsewhere I have developed a comprehensive theory of character in the Gospel of John that I am applying and testing in this book.² As we shall see, most scholars view the Johannine characters as one-dimensional ('types') and unchanging. This book aims to provide a fresh analysis of the Johannine characters and their responses to Jesus, showing that many characters are more complex, round and developing than most scholars would have us believe.

Before we start with our main task we will briefly consider what other scholars have done (and not done) on the subject of character in the Gospel of John. [*The reader who is not interested in a detailed review may skip the next section and go directly to the section 'The Gaps' which sums up the lacunae in Johannine character studies.*] Then, we shall explain how we understand, analyse and classify character in John's narrative – in short, our theory of character. After that, we will introduce John's story of Jesus in which the characters appear, and finally, we will spell out the plan and approach of the book.

Previous Studies on Johannine Character

Ours is not the first study on Johannine characters so we will examine others' contributions to the subject in order to firmly anchor our work. As Sir Isaac Newton said, 'If I have seen further . . . it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants.' This survey will help us identify the questions that have been left unanswered and issues that have been insufficiently dealt with. We will draw attention to those scholars who have provided significant commentary on the subject of Johannine characterization. Most studies on the subject have been done in the last two decades, corresponding to the increasing interest in the Gospel of John as a literary work.

One of the earliest treatises on Johannine characters is an article from 1956 by Eva Krafft.³ Influenced by Rudolf Bultmann's commentary on John, she argues that John made his characters typically transparent and that they personify a certain attitude to Jesus. Next, Raymond Collins wrote a lengthy article on Johannine characters in 1976 (reprinted in 1990), and added a second essay in 1995.⁴ He argues that the various characters in John's gospel

² C. Bennema, 'A Theory of Character in the Fourth Gospel with Reference to Ancient and Modern Literature', *BibInt* 17 (2009): 375–421. Below, we provide a summary of our theory.

³ E. Krafft, 'Die Personen des Johannesevangeliums', *EvT* 16 (1956): 18–32.

⁴ R.F. Collins, 'Representative Figures', in *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (LTPM 2; Louvain/Grand Rapids: Peeters Press/Eerdmans, 1990), 1–45; repr.

represent a particular type of faith-response to Jesus; they are cast in a representative role and serve a typical function.⁵ Krafft and Collins' descriptions of the characters are not very detailed and they do not classify the characters or their responses to Jesus. The reader is left with a collection of unconnected character descriptions since their studies are neither preceded by guidelines on how to analyse character nor followed by an evaluation of how the various characters relate to one another. We also question whether John's characters are as 'transparent' or 'definitely typecast' as Krafft and Collins would have us believe.

The 1980s witnessed the first book-length treatment of John's gospel as a literary work with Alan Culpepper's seminal work *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* in which he devotes one chapter to Johannine characters.⁶ Culpepper provides a short theoretical discussion on characterization, arguing that John draws from both Greek and Hebrew models of character, although most Johannine characters represent particular ethical types (as in Greek literature). Using the modern character classifications of literary critics Forster and Harvey,⁷ Culpepper, like Collins, contends that most of John's minor characters are 'the personification of a single trait' and are 'typical characters easily recognizable by the readers'.⁸ For Culpepper, the Johannine characters are particular kinds of choosers: 'Given the pervasive dualism of the Fourth Gospel, the choice is either/or. All situations are reduced to two clear-cut alternatives, and all the characters eventually make their choice.'⁹ He then produces, in relation to John's ideological point of view, an extensive taxonomy of belief-responses in which a character can progress or regress from one response to another.¹⁰

Culpepper describes almost all the relevant Johannine characters but his characterization is sketchy because his aim is to explore the entire literary 'anatomy' of John's gospel, of which characterization is merely one (though important) aspect. His presentation of John's characters may also be too simplistic: Does Nicodemus make a clear choice? Are Peter and Pilate typical characters, easily recognizable? Is Thomas simply the doubter? More importantly, Culpepper does not classify the characters themselves but only their responses, thereby reducing the characters to their typical responses and hence to types. Besides, his taxonomy of belief-responses appears to imply ranking or comparison, which raises questions: Is the response of belief in Jesus' words (the Samaritan woman, the royal official)

from *Downside Review* 94 (1976): 26–46; 95 (1976): 118–32; R.F. Collins, 'From John to the Beloved Disciples: An Essay on Johannine Characters', *Int* 49 (1995): 359–69.

⁵ Collins, 'Figures', 8; *idem*, 'John', 361.

⁶ R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 99–148. Culpepper does interact with Krafft and Collins.

⁷ For Forster and Harvey's character classifications, see Bennema, 'Theory', 391–2.

⁸ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 102–4.

⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 104 (emphasis added).

¹⁰ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 145–8.

superior or inferior to that of commitment in spite of misunderstandings (the disciples)?

Since the 1990s many scholars have applied the principles of literary theory to John's gospel, which explains the increasing interest in studying Johannine characters. For example, Margaret Davies undertook a comprehensive reading of John's gospel, mainly using structuralism and reader-response criticism, and dedicated one chapter to various Johannine characters.¹¹ She contends that most of the characters are flat caricatures, having a single trait and showing little or no development.¹² Her conclusions resemble those of Krafft, Collins and Culpepper, although surprisingly she does not interact with them.

Mark Stibbe also did some important work on characterization in John 8, 11 and 18 – 19 to show how narrative criticism can be applied to the Gospel of John, and he was the first to present a number of characters, like Pilate and Peter, as more complicated than had previously been assumed.¹³ Stibbe provides brief theoretical considerations on characterization, stressing that readers must (i) construct character by inference from fragmentary information in the text (like in ancient Hebrew narratives); (ii) analyse characters with reference to history rather than according to the laws of fiction; and (iii) consider the gospel's ideological point of view, expressed in 20:31.¹⁴ In addition, throughout his commentary, Stibbe highlights how John portrays the various characters in his gospel.¹⁵

In a detailed narratological analysis of John 13 – 17, François Tolmie also examines its characters.¹⁶ He undergirds his study with the most extensive theoretical discussion up to now. He follows the narratological model of Rimmon-Kenan (who in turn draws on Chatman) and utilizes the character classification of Ewen, but also refers to Forster, Harvey and Greimas.¹⁷ However, Tolmie only discusses contemporary fiction and does not consider character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature. The main weakness of his study is his use of various character classifications, concluding that the models of Greimas and Ewen are the most suitable for classifying characters.¹⁸ We contend that Greimas's classification is *not* the best model to

¹¹ M. Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (JSNTS 69; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 316–49. Elsewhere she refers to the world, 'the Jews' and Pilate (*Rhetoric*, 154–8, 313–5).

¹² Davies, *Rhetoric*, 157, 332, 338.

¹³ M.W.G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS 73; Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 97–9, 106–13, 119; *idem*, *John's Gospel* (London: Routledge, 1994), 90–96, 121–5. Stibbe interacts with Culpepper but not with Krafft or Collins.

¹⁴ Stibbe, *Storyteller*, 24–25, 28; *idem*, *John's Gospel*, 10–11.

¹⁵ M.W.G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

¹⁶ D.F. Tolmie, *Jesus' Farewell to the Disciples: John 13:1 – 17:26 in Narratological Perspective* (BIS 12; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 117–44.

¹⁷ Tolmie, *Farewell*, 13–28, 117–24, 141–4. The literary theories of Rimmon-Kenan, Chatman, Ewen, Forster, Harvey and Greimas regarding character in modern fiction are explained in Bennema, 'Theory', 389–92.

¹⁸ Tolmie, *Farewell*, 141–4.

analyse characters since it concentrates on plot, thereby reducing characters to mere actants. Applying Ewen's non-reductionist classification, Tolmie, ironically, evaluates all characters (except God, Jesus and the Spirit) as flat – they have a single trait or are not complex, show no development, and reveal no inner life.¹⁹ Tolmie probably arrives at a reductionist understanding of the Johannine characters because he examines only a section of the Johannine narrative, John 13 – 17 – although he briefly summarizes information from John 1 – 12. This is methodologically incorrect and we contend that one must analyse the entire text continuum of the Gospel of John to reconstruct its characters.

Viewing the Gospel of John as a trial, Robert Maccini focuses on the subject of women as witnesses, looking at Jesus' mother, the Samaritan woman, Martha, Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene.²⁰ Although Maccini admits that men also function as witnesses,²¹ we believe his study would have been strengthened if he had studied women and men together. Due to his specific agenda, Maccini provides no theoretical discussion of character and does not classify the characters or their responses.

Another specialized contribution comes from David Beck, who studies the concept of anonymity in relation to discipleship.²² He argues that anonymity facilitates readers' identification with characters and that only the unnamed characters serve as models of appropriate responses to Jesus.²³ Beck also provides a brief theoretical discussion on character. Rejecting three methods of character analysis (Forster's psychological model, Greimas's structuralist approach and Fokkema's semiotic approach), he adopts John Darr's model, which is influenced by the reader-oriented theory of Wolfgang Iser, and considers how characterization entices readers into fuller participation in the narrative.²⁴ Beck, however, overstates his case, thereby misreading various characters. First, contra Beck, the invalid at the pool in John 5 is not a model to be emulated since he does not heed Jesus' warning and instead reports him to the Jewish authorities, leading to Jesus' being persecuted (5:14–16). Second, Beck's attempt to squeeze the adulterous woman of 7:53 – 8:11 into his mould of paradigmatic discipleship (even though he admits that the narrative does not record her response or witness) is unconvincing. Third, why do the responses of Nathanael, Martha and Thomas not constitute an appropriate belief-response (so Beck) – especially when their confessions

¹⁹ Tolmie, *Farewell*, 142–3.

²⁰ R.G. Maccini, *Her Testimony is True: Women as Witnesses according to John* (JSNTS 125; Sheffield: SAP, 1996).

²¹ Maccini, *Testimony*, 243–4.

²² D.R. Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (BIS 27; Leiden: Brill, 1997). Beck's monograph builds on his earlier essay, 'The Narrative Function of Anonymity in Fourth Gospel Characterization', *Semeia* 63 (1993): 143–58.

²³ Beck, *Discipleship*, 1–2, 9, 137–42; *idem*, 'Function', 147, 155.

²⁴ Beck, *Discipleship*, 6–8. Beck spends most time discussing the concept of anonymity and readers' identification with characters (*Discipleship*, 10–29).

closely resemble the ideal Johannine confession in 20:31? Finally, do John (the Baptist) as the ideal witness to Jesus, Andrew as a finder of people, Peter as the shepherd in the making, and Mary who expresses her affection of Jesus in an extraordinary devotional act not depict aspects of true discipleship? Thus, Beck is incorrect in his character analysis and too categorical in concluding that *only* the anonymous characters represent a paradigm of discipleship.

Like Maccini, Adeline Fehribach also examines the five women in John's gospel – Jesus' mother, the Samaritan woman, Martha, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene – arguing that their primary function is to support the portrayal of Jesus as the messianic bridegroom.²⁵ Her theoretical discussion of character is minimal, but she does draw on character-types in the Hebrew Bible, Hellenistic-Jewish literature and Graeco-Roman literature in her analysis of Johannine women.²⁶ If she had studied all the Johannine characters, female and male, she would have discovered that *all* characters function in various ways as supports in the portrayal of Jesus; they all act as foils, enhancing the reader's understanding of Jesus' identity and mission. Besides, as we shall see, Fehribach's understanding of the role of the Johannine women simply as advancing the plot and the portrayal of Jesus as the bridegroom is too reductionistic; they are important in their own right and fulfil larger roles than Fehribach ascribes to them. Finally, driven by a feminist agenda to expose the patriarchy and androcentrism of John's gospel (and the culture of that time), she tends to detect more sexual connotations in John's gospel than the text warrants.

In 2001, James Resseguie produced a monograph on point of view in the Gospel of John.²⁷ In his chapter on character study, he explores various characters from a material point of view and classifies them according to their dominance or social presence in society rather than their faith-response *per se*.²⁸ For example, Nicodemus, who represents the dominant culture, abandons his material perspective for a spiritual one, and the lame man, who represents the marginalized of society, is freed from the constraints of the dominant culture and even acts counter-culturally by violating the Sabbath.²⁹ Resseguie claims that the characters' material points of view contribute or relate to the gospel's overall ideology.³⁰ However, we contend that the gospel's overall ideology is soteriological rather than sociological because it is directly related to the gospel's purpose (20:30–31) and world-view, which are both soteriological in orientation. Any evaluation of the

²⁵ A. Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist Historical-Literary Analysis of the Female Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998).

²⁶ Fehribach, *Women*, 15–7, *passim*.

²⁷ J.L. Resseguie, *The Strange Gospel: Narrative Design and Point of View in John* (BIS 56; Leiden: Brill, 2001).

²⁸ Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, 109–68.

²⁹ Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, 127, 137–8, 167.

³⁰ Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, 109–10.

characters' belief-responses to Jesus should therefore be in the light of the gospel's soteriological point of view rather than their material or socio-economic standing.

Colleen Conway produced two important but very different works on Johannine characters. In her 1999 monograph, she looks at Johannine characterization from the perspective of gender, asking whether men and women are presented differently in the Gospel of John.³¹ Analysing five female and five male characters, she concludes that throughout John's gospel women are presented positively while male characters present a different, inconsistent pattern – Nicodemus, Pilate and Peter are depicted negatively; the man born blind and the Beloved Disciple positively.³² Conway presents a brief overview of Johannine character studies but has not included the monographs of Tolmie and Beck.³³ She also provides an informed theoretical discussion of character in which she leans toward the contemporary theories of Chatman and Hochman, and includes Hebrew techniques of characterization (but leaves out character in ancient Greek literature).³⁴

Conway's second contribution to Johannine characterization, in 2002, is more significant.³⁵ In this provocative article, she radically challenges the consensus view that the Johannine characters represent particular belief-responses. Criticizing this 'flattening' of characters, she argues that Johannine characters contain varying degrees of ambiguity and do more to complicate the clear choice between belief and unbelief than to illustrate it. Rather than positioning the (minor) characters on a spectrum of negative to positive faith-responses, Conway claims that the minor characters appear unstable in relation to Jesus as if shifting up and down such a spectrum. In doing so, the characters challenge, undercut and subvert the dualistic world of the gospel because they do not line up on either side of the belief/unbelief divide.³⁶ Whether Conway's conclusion that the Johannine characters resist and undermine the binary categories of belief and unbelief can be sustained needs to be seen, but her argument that the minor characters are often presented as too simplistic may be true. Conway's observation that scholars often disagree about what belief-response each character typifies or represents – which is indeed surprising if the Johannine characters are as flat, typecast and transparent as they suggest – certainly needs to be taken seriously.

³¹ C.M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (SBLDS 167; Atlanta: SBL, 1999).

³² Conway, *Men and Women*, 69–205.

³³ Conway, *Men and Women*, 42–7.

³⁴ Conway, *Men and Women*, 50–63.

³⁵ C.M. Conway, 'Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel', *BibInt* 10 (2002): 324–41.

³⁶ Conway, 'Ambiguity', 339–40.

Craig Koester, in his chapter on characterization, also subscribes to the idea that each of John's characters represents a particular faith-response.³⁷ Koester's strength is that he interprets John's characters on the basis of the text and its historical context.³⁸ He sees many parallels between John's story and ancient Greek drama or tragedy, where characters are types who convey general truths by representing a moral choice.³⁹ However, Koester simply accepts Aristotle's view of character, whereas we have found that character in Greek tragedy could be more complex and round.⁴⁰ Moreover, many Johannine characters, such as Nicodemus, Peter, Judas and Pilate, do not fit the category of type; they are more complex, ambiguous and round.⁴¹ Finally, Koester shows insufficient interaction with others who have studied Johannine characters – he does not refer to the works of Davies, Tolmie and Beck, he mentions but does not interact with Stibbe, Resseguie and Conway, and hardly interacts with Collins and Culpepper.

Ruth Edwards has devoted one chapter in her book to Johannine characters.⁴² Although this chapter is short and sketchy, she recognizes that many Johannine characters are not stereotypical or 'flat'.⁴³ She, like Conway, is interested in whether John portrays women and men differently and treats them in different sections. However, while she touches on all the female characters, she neglects prominent male characters such as John (the Baptist), the lame man and Pilate. She has also left out complex characters such as 'the Jews', the crowd and the world.

Margaret Beirne examines six gender pairs of characters – Jesus' mother and the royal official, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, the man born blind and Martha, Mary of Bethany and Judas, Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdalene and Thomas – and concludes that women and men are equal in terms of the nature and value of discipleship.⁴⁴

³⁷ C.R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (2d edn; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 33–77.

³⁸ See esp. Koester, *Symbolism*, 35.

³⁹ Koester, *Symbolism*, 36–9.

⁴⁰ Bennema, 'Theory', 382–9.

⁴¹ Koester perhaps provides some corrective when he says about the Johannine characters that 'their representative roles do not negate their individuality but actually develop their most distinctive traits' (*Symbolism*, 35).

⁴² R. Edwards, *Discovering John* (London: SPCK, 2003), ch. 10.

⁴³ Edwards, *John*, 111.

⁴⁴ M.M. Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals* (JSNTS 242; London: SAP, 2003). Most scholars who focus on the female characters in John's gospel (Maccini, Fehribach, Conway, Edwards, Beirne), evaluate them positively. Fehribach, however, concludes that John's gospel, in its portrayal of women, supports the androcentric and patriarchal principles of that time and culture, and does not present a community of believers in which women are equal to men (*Women*, 175–9). S. van Tilborg also evaluates the portrayal of women in John's gospel negatively: in the beginning of the various stories Jesus is inviting and open to women but each time there is a phase in the story where this openness dissipates and Jesus retreats from this relation to women and returns to the male partners (*Imaginative Love in John* [BIS 2; Leiden: Brill, 1993], ch. 4 [esp. 207–8]). In our analysis of the female charac-

Although her agenda is different from ours, Beirne's analysis of Johannine characters could nevertheless serve our purpose because she recognizes that

these gender pairs serve as a foil for Jesus' ongoing self-revelation and demonstrate a range of faith responses with which the reader may identify. In order to thus engage the reader, and thereby fulfil the gospel's stated purpose (20.31), the evangelist has portrayed them not as mere functionaries, but as engaging and varied characters.⁴⁵

Beirne repeatedly points out that although many Johannine characters are representative of a particular belief-response, they are also characters in their own right and cannot be typecast or stereotyped.⁴⁶

Jo-Ann Brant explores the relationship between the Gospel of John and ancient Greek tragedy.⁴⁷ She also interprets the Johannine characters against the backdrop of Greek drama.⁴⁸ For example, 'the Jews' are not actors in the Johannine drama but function as the deliberating chorus in a Greek drama – a corporate voice at the sidelines, witnesses to the action. As such the deliberation of 'the Jews' and their response of unbelief provides the believing audience an opportunity to look into the mind of the other, whose perspective it does not share. In this role as a collective, deliberating voice in the Johannine drama, 'the Jews' should not be associated with any particular historical group in Judaism.⁴⁹ Brant concludes that 'the characters of the Fourth Gospel like the characters of a tragedy . . . are not to be held accountable, to be pronounced innocent or guilty.'⁵⁰ She thus deliberately refrains from any evaluation since she contends that 'the Fourth Gospel does not invite us to line up the characters into categories of good and evil, saved and damned'.⁵¹ Drawing parallels with ancient Greek tragedy, Brant argues that readers are not members of a jury, evaluating characters as right or wrong, innocent or guilty, or answering christological questions about Jesus' identity, but are called to join the Fourth Evangelist in commemorating Jesus' life.⁵² 'Instead of asking, "Who are the children of God?" – that is, inquiring about who is in and who is out – the question that the Fourth Gospel addresses seems to be, "What does it mean to be children of God?"'⁵³

ters in John's gospel, we shall see that the conclusions of Fehribach and van Tilborg cannot be sustained. Cf. Beirne's critique of Fehribach (*Women*, 8–9, 44–5 n. 8, 179 n. 34, 201 n. 21).

⁴⁵ Beirne, *Women*, 219; cf. 25–6.

⁴⁶ Beirne, *Women*, 65, 101, 135, 167–8, 219. It is surprising that Beirne has missed Conway's 1999 monograph on the subject.

⁴⁷ J.A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004).

⁴⁸ Brant, *Dialogue*, 159–232.

⁴⁹ Brant, *Dialogue*, 178–87.

⁵⁰ Brant, *Dialogue*, 225.

⁵¹ Brant, *Dialogue*, 225.

⁵² Brant, *Dialogue*, 225–6; 259–60.

⁵³ Brant, *Dialogue*, 231.

There are a few problems with Brant's case. First, 'the Jews' do function as a character that actively participates in the Johannine drama; contra Brant, 'the Jews' hand Jesus over and then manipulate Pilate to pass the death sentence and thus achieve the premeditated outcome (11:47–53). Besides, 'the Jews' are not simply a literary construct that fulfils a particular role in the Johannine drama; we have demonstrated elsewhere that 'the Jews' are a composite group with a historical identity.⁵⁴ Second, if Brant had considered John's evaluative point of view and purpose, she would have realized that the narrative itself calls for the evaluation or judgement of the characters' responses to Jesus. The narrative and its inbuilt perspective *demand* that the reader reflect on and assess each character. Third, Brant wrongly assumes that John's purpose for writing his gospel is only to deepen the existing faith of believers when the gospel is also meant to persuade outsiders to believe in Jesus and thereby participate in the eternal life available in him.⁵⁵

The most recent contribution to the subject comes from James Howard, who briefly looks at some minor characters and their responses to Jesus' miraculous signs, concluding that each character represents either belief or unbelief.⁵⁶ However, his findings do not go beyond the standard commentaries and his portrayal of most characters is too reductionistic: for example, he concludes that the key trait of both the royal official and Martha and Mary is a 'belief resulting from needs' and that the key trait of the blind man is 'belief in the context of signs'.⁵⁷

In addition to the works mentioned above, there are studies on individual characters that we will interact with in the respective chapters. The commentaries provide valuable information on our subject but their verse-by-verse comments result in scattered images of the characters.

The Gaps

Our examination of recent studies on Johannine character reveals a few gaps. First, these studies either lack breadth (only looking at a few characters or at a certain aspect of character),⁵⁸ or depth (only providing a cursory

⁵⁴ C. Bennema, 'The Identity and Composition of *hoi Ioudaioi* in the Gospel of John', *TynB* 60 (forthcoming 2009).

⁵⁵ Cf. C. Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel* (WUNT 2/148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 107–9.

⁵⁶ J.M. Howard, 'The Significance of Minor Characters in the Gospel of John', *BibSac* 163 (2006): 63–78.

⁵⁷ Howard, 'Significance', 77.

⁵⁸ E.g. Maccini and Fehribach study five female characters; Beck focuses on anonymous characters; Conway and Beirne examine gender pairs; others, such as Stibbe, Tolmie, Resseguie, Brant and Howard, examine only a few characters.

analysis of some characters).⁵⁹ This is obviously due to the limitations set by each author's project or emphasis. As a result, certain characters such as John (the Baptist), 'the world', Nathanael, 'the crowd', 'the Twelve' and Joseph of Arimathea have received virtually no attention in Johannine scholarship. Even the most comprehensive and significant contribution on the subject to date – that of Culpepper in 1983 – has scope for improvement. He provides a theoretical basis for his examination of the Johannine characters (although a rudimentary one), deals with all the relevant Johannine characters (except 'the world'), and provides an extensive taxonomy of faith-responses (but does not classify the characters themselves).⁶⁰ Our book, then, will deal *extensively* with *all* the relevant Johannine characters *and* their belief-responses to Jesus.

The second observation is that there is no comprehensive theory of character in the Gospel of John. Many scholars do not discuss any theory of character (Krafft, Collins, Davies, Maccini, Fehribach, Edwards, Beirne, Howard), while others provide a few theoretical considerations (Culpepper, Stibbe, Beck, Resseguie, Koester, Brant), but this is far short of a coherent, comprehensive theory of character. Only Tolmie and Conway undergird their character studies with a strong theoretical discussion. Remarkably, there is no consensus on how to analyse, classify and evaluate characters. Should we draw on ancient methods of characterization (whether Hebrew, Greek or both) or perhaps employ modern methods used in fiction?⁶¹ As for character classification, some scholars tend to oversimplify Johannine characters and categorize them as being flat, minor or ficelles (Krafft, Collins, Culpepper, Davies, Tolmie, Koester), while others classify the characters according to gender (Conway, Edwards, Beirne), name (Beck), or dominance in society (Resseguie). Only Tolmie uses a more advanced, non-reductionist classification, but, ironically, reduces the characters to being flat.⁶² Regarding characters' responses to Jesus, only Culpepper has attempted to classify them, although we disagree with his implied ranking – the evaluation of 'adequate' and 'inadequate' would have sufficed. Most scholars simply provide a string of character descriptions without collating them or classifying the characters and their responses. We contend that all the characters must be classified according to their responses to Jesus

⁵⁹ E.g. the studies of Collins, Koester and Edwards.

⁶⁰ A few others also propose a spectrum or typology of faith-responses, although incomplete and sketchy: R.E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB 29; 2 vols; London: Chapman, 1971), 1:530–31; S.C. Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1992), 128–30; Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 124.

⁶¹ For example, Culpepper uses the modern character classifications of Forster and Harvey, while accepting that John draws from Greek and Hebrew models of character. Stibbe contends that John uses Hebrew narrative techniques, while Koester and Brant consider Greek tragedy for their understanding of Johannine character. Tolmie and Beck rely mainly on contemporary literary theories. Conway builds on insights from both contemporary literary theory (esp. Chatman and Hochman) and Hebrew characterization.

⁶² Tolmie, *Farewell*, 141–3.

because John demands it. He wants us to evaluate the responses in the light of the purpose of his gospel, mentioned in 20:30–31. This means that we must develop a comprehensive *theoretical* framework to study the Johannine characters.

Third, the majority of scholars who deal with Johannine characterization have limited themselves to a literary approach, although Stibbe and Koester provide a corrective. We suggest that, besides the text itself, the social-historical world in which John's story occurs should also be examined. A combination of narrative and historical criticism, or historical narrative criticism would seem a more appropriate method. We will therefore take a text-centred approach but explore other sources if the text invites us to do so or if those sources can shed greater light on the text we study. Our study of Johannine characters will thus be *more grounded* in the world of first-century Judaism.

Fourth, Conway, in her 2002 article, has pointed out a glaring discrepancy: while many scholars argue that most of John's minor characters personify one single trait or belief-response to Jesus, there is surprisingly little agreement on what each character typifies or represents. She radically challenges the consensus view that 'flattens' Johannine characters to particular belief-responses, arguing that the Johannine characters portray varying degrees of ambiguity, causing instability and resulting in responses to Jesus that resist or undermine the gospel's binary categories of belief and unbelief. Any response to Conway's challenge would necessitate a fresh analysis of Johannine characters. We would have to test whether the minor Johannine characters are as flat, transparent and one-dimensional as most scholars would have us believe. If we find that the Johannine characters are more complex and ambiguous, we would need to explain how they operate in John's dualistic world which only seems to offer the two choices of belief and unbelief.

In sum, we must employ a comprehensive, non-reductionist theoretical framework in which we can analyse and classify both the characters and their responses. We must provide an in-depth analysis of all the Johannine characters that present a (verbal or non-verbal) response to Jesus, using a text-centred approach that will allow us to look at other sources too. Finally, we must explain how all the responses fit into John's dualistic worldview.

A Theory of Character

Many scholars perceive character in the Hebrew Bible (where characters can develop) to be radically different from that in ancient Greek literature (where characters are supposedly consistent ethical types). Most scholars also sharply distinguish between modern fiction with its psychological,

individualistic approach to character and ancient characterization where character lacks personality or individuality. When it comes to John's gospel, as we observed in the previous sections, the majority of scholars regard most if not all Johannine characters as 'flat' or 'types'. I question these views and propose a different approach to character in the Gospel of John. What follows is a summary of a comprehensive theory of character in John's gospel, which I have explained at length elsewhere.⁶³ I began by examining concepts of character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature as well as modern fiction, arguing that although there are differences in characterization, these are differences in emphases rather than kind. It is therefore better to speak of degrees of characterization along a continuum. Both ancient and modern literature can portray flat and round, static and dynamic characters, although in modern fiction character is far more developed and 'psychologized'.

I then articulated a comprehensive theory of character for John's gospel, consisting of three aspects. First, we study character in text and context, using information in the text and other sources. Since the Gospel of John is a non-fictional narrative whose author is a reliable eyewitness to the events recorded (19:35; 21:24), the Johannine characters have historical referents and must be interpreted within the socio-historical first-century Jewish context and not just on the basis of the text itself. The historical data available to us from other (literary and non-literary) sources should supplement the data that the text provides about a character. At the same time, John may have 'fictionalized' or embellished aspects of his characters by leaving out, changing or adding certain details from his sources – as historians and biographers often do. For example, John (the Baptist) appears in this gospel as an eloquent witness to Jesus while the Synoptics present him as a rough-hewn figure preaching a baptism of repentance. Was the so-called Beloved Disciple as perfect as this gospel portrays him or has he been somewhat 'idealized'? If the Gospels belong to the genre of ancient Graeco-Roman biography (as many scholars contend today),⁶⁴ they need not necessarily be historically accurate in every detail. The authors may have used literary 'creativity' but what matters is that the reader does not doubt their explicit or implicit truth claims.

Second, we analyse and classify the Johannine characters along three dimensions (complexity, development, inner life), and then plot the resulting character on a continuum of degree of characterization (from agent to type to personality to individuality). We classify the Johannine characters, using the non-reductionist classification of Jewish scholar Yosef Ewen, who advocates three continua or axes upon which a character may be situated:

⁶³ Bennema, 'Theory', 375–421 (see n. 2 for details).

⁶⁴ The compelling case for this has been made by R.A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (2d edn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004; orig. SNTSMS 70; Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 213–32.

- Complexity: characters range from those displaying a single trait to those displaying a complex web of traits, with varying degrees of complexity in between.
- Development: characters may vary from those who show no development to those who are fully developed. Development is not simply the addition of a trait that the reader infers further along the text continuum or a character's progress in his or her understanding of Jesus. Development is revealed in the character's ability to surprise the reader, when a newly found trait replaces another or does not fit neatly into the existing set of traits, implying that the character has changed.
- Penetration into the inner life: characters range from those who allow us a peek inside their minds to those whose minds remain opaque.⁶⁵

After analysing and classifying each character along these three continua, we can create a continuum showing *degree of characterization*. We can plot each character on this resultant continuum as (i) an agent, actant or walk-on; (ii) a type, stock or flat character; (iii) a character with personality; or (iv) an individual or person.⁶⁶ In the concluding chapter we shall present the results of our character analysis in the following table:

| Character | Complexity | Development | Inner Life | Degree of Characterization |
|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|----------------------------|
| Character 1 | – | 0 | – | type |
| Character 2 | –/+ | 0 | 0 | type |
| Character 3 | –/+ | 0 | – | personality |
| Character 4 | + | + | – | personality |
| Character 5 | ++ | + | + | towards individual |
| Character 6 | ++ | ++ | + | individual |

0 = none, – = little, + = some, ++ = much

Third, besides examining and classifying the Johannine characters, we must also analyse and classify their *responses* towards Jesus. Contra many scholars who perceive the Johannine characters as types, we argue that it is their responses to Jesus that are typical.⁶⁷ We say this because John has presented an array of responses to Jesus that are applicable in any time and context – they are human responses. But a character's typical belief-response need not reduce the entire character to a type. The responses of the Johannine characters to Jesus are part of a larger soteriological framework that is informed by the purpose and worldview of John's gospel. John's dualistic worldview only allows for the options of acceptance or rejection of Jesus,

⁶⁵ Ewen's works are only available in Hebrew but his theory is summarized in S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New York: Methuen, 1983), 41–2.

⁶⁶ In this study we do not analyse agents, such as the master of ceremonies in 2:9–10 and the servants of the royal official in 4:51–52, since they simply fulfil a function in the plot and do not make any response to Jesus.

⁶⁷ In ch. 25, however, we shall affirm the representative value of the Johannine characters.

and hence each response is either adequate or inadequate. We define an adequate belief-response to Jesus as a sufficiently true, Spirit-provided understanding of Jesus in terms of his identity, mission and relationship with his Father, resulting in an allegiance to Jesus.⁶⁸ We can, however, not quantify such a belief-response, i.e. we cannot determine how much authentic understanding is adequate. Instead, we determine whether or not a character's response is adequate by discerning John's evaluation of this response, which is determined by his evaluative point of view.

We therefore analyse and evaluate the characters' responses to Jesus in keeping with *John's* evaluative point of view, purpose and dualistic worldview. As the Johannine characters interact with Jesus, the author evaluates their responses according to his ideology and point of view and communicates this ideological or evaluative system to the reader with the intention that the reader embraces it. This is the author's evaluative point of view and the reader's task is to discover and reconstruct it. John's evaluative point of view corresponds to both the soteriological purpose of his narrative (20:31) and his dualistic worldview in which there is scope for only two responses to Jesus – acceptance or rejection. John's evaluative point of view therefore allows for two options – adequate and inadequate. This raises an important question. If the characters' responses to Jesus are varied and form a broad spectrum, how do they fit in with the dualistic scheme that John has adopted? How will such diverse responses fit into the binary categories of belief and unbelief, adequate and inadequate? We shall address this issue in our concluding chapter and also present the array of responses to Jesus as well as John's evaluation of each response.

John's Story of Jesus

A story consists of events and characters, held together by a plot.⁶⁹ Before we analyse the Johannine characters we must look at John's story. If plot is the logical and causal sequence of events, the plot of John's gospel is the revelation of the Father and Son – their identity, character, mission and relationship – and people's response to this revelation (see, e.g. 1:10–12, 18; 3:16–18; 14:6–10; 17:6–8).⁷⁰ John 1:4 puts the story in a nutshell, 'in him [Jesus] was (divine) life', and the rest of the gospel then expands this concept. The purpose of John's story is to persuade the reader to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ and the source of everlasting life or

⁶⁸ Bennema, *Power*, 124–33; *idem*, 'Christ, the Spirit and the Knowledge of God: A Study in Johannine Epistemology', in *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God* (ed. M. Healy and R. Parry; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 119–20.

⁶⁹ Cf. S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 19; Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 3, 6; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 7.

⁷⁰ Cf. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 87–9; Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 34, 40–44.

salvation (20:31).⁷¹ Through his story John wants to elicit and increase faith in the life-giving Jesus amongst his readers.

John's story world is both dualistic and symbolic. It is dualistic in that the world of the narrative is divided into two realms or spheres – the realm above or heaven and the realm below or the earth. God, Jesus, the Spirit, revelation, life, light, grace, truth, freedom and glory belong to the realm of heaven; the devil, the world, 'the Jews', flesh, darkness, blindness, death, lies and sin belong to the realm of the earth. This dualism is also found in John's presentation of salvation: people ultimately accept or reject Jesus and his life-giving revelation. John explains that people are naturally 'from below' and in order to enter into the realm 'from above' (i.e. salvation) they need to be born 'from above' (3:3–6; cf. 8:23). Jesus functions as the mediator between the two realms (1:51; 3:13, 31–36) because there is no natural contact between them (cf. 1:10; 3:6, 31; 14:17).

John's narrative world is also highly symbolic. The life-giving qualities of Jesus and his revelatory teaching are often expressed in symbols such as water (4:10–11; 7:38), bread (6:33, 35, 51), light (1:4–5; 8:12), gate (10:9), vine (15:1, 5). John also uses other symbols including flesh (3:6), darkness/night (1:5; 3:2; 8:12; 13:30) and blindness (9:1–41). Symbols, as Stibbe explains, are connecting links between two levels of meaning in a story, between two spheres – the sphere of the symbol itself and the sphere that the symbol represents.⁷² The Johannine symbols are vehicles of Jesus' life-giving revelation, but their effectiveness depends on whether people perceive that the symbols are pointers to another reality.⁷³

We will now outline the story within which the characters operate.⁷⁴ John paints a bleak picture of the world: it does not have a (saving) knowledge of God (7:28; 8:55; 15:21; 16:3; 17:25) and is enveloped in darkness (1:5; 12:46). His verdict in 3:19 is damning: 'the light [Jesus] has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.' The world, according to John, is in need of life-giving knowledge about God (cf. 6:63; 17:3). Since people do not naturally possess this life-giving knowledge – they neither belong to the realm of God nor can they access this divine realm – the solution must come from the realm above. As John 3:16–17 states, the Father sent the Son into the world to save it. Or, as John explains in his Prologue (1:1–18), the divine response to the world's crisis was illuminating revelation; the Logos-Light came into the world to enlighten its darkness through the revelation of God. The world, however, did not recognize or accept the incarnate Logos, but those who did receive him, i.e. believe in him, became part of God's family (1:10–13).

⁷¹ For a discussion of the textual variant in 20:31 ('so that you may *come or continue* to believe'), see Bennema, *Power*, 107–9 or any major commentary.

⁷² Stibbe, *Storyteller*, 19, 27.

⁷³ J. Painter, 'Johannine Symbols: A Case Study in Epistemology', *JTSA* 27 (1979): 33, 38.

⁷⁴ For a detailed treatment of the Johannine story, see Bennema, 'Christ', 107–33.

Jesus' salvific mission is to reveal the character, identity and work of the Father and himself, and the nature of their relationship (1:18; 3:11–13, 31–36; 8:19; 14:9–11; 15:15; 17:6–8, 26). This life-giving or saving knowledge of God comes primarily through Jesus' revelatory teaching. People who encounter Jesus and his revelation must respond – either accepting or rejecting Jesus and his salvific teaching. In order to respond adequately in belief, a person must understand Jesus' teaching. However, John's characters often appear dull, tend to misunderstand Jesus or find his teaching difficult. In short, people lack understanding and hence the capacity to respond adequately in belief. The Spirit is the cognitive agent who enables people to progress in their understanding of and belief-response to Jesus. Those who are enabled to produce an adequate belief-response enter, through a birth of the Spirit, into a saving relationship with the Father and Son (1:12–13; 3:3, 5).

John's concept of saving belief is broader than a propositional knowledge of Jesus. Saving belief is not merely an initial adequate belief-response; it demands an ongoing belief expressed in discipleship. A person is not simply required to enter into a life-giving relationship with Jesus but also to remain in that relationship (cf. 8:31; 14:23; 15:1–10). The challenge is for people to stick with Jesus. As John 6:60–66 sadly reveals, many 'disciples' give up and no longer follow Jesus when they begin to realize what Jesus requires of them. Similarly, when Jesus probes the 'belief' of some of 'the Jews' it proves to have little substance – they are unable to accept his liberating truth and even turn violent (8:30–59). A continuous demonstration of discipleship – for instance, to love, remain in, testify to, and follow Jesus – is essential to sustain salvation. Saving belief for John is then *an initial adequate belief-response enabled by the Spirit and expressed in an allegiance to Jesus that is then sustained in discipleship*.⁷⁵

Let us summarize John's story of Jesus. People do not know God and are not from God. They can know God through an understanding and acceptance of Jesus' revelatory teaching that contains this saving knowledge, and consequently become from God through a new birth. People who encounter Jesus and his teaching and signs, are required to make a response to Jesus and his revelation. John presents a broad spectrum of responses – which we will investigate in this book – but they boil down to two choices. People either accept Jesus and his revelation which brings them into a saving relationship with the Father and the Son, or they reject him which results in immediate judgement and ultimately death (3:15–18, 36; 5:24; 6:35, 53–54). Today, as we read John's gospel, we are confronted with Jesus just as the characters in the story were and face the same challenge: where do we stand in relation to Jesus?

⁷⁵ For a comprehensive treatment of John's understanding of salvation and the role of the Spirit, see Bennema, *Power*, chs 3–5.

Our Plan and Approach

John uses characters to achieve the stated purpose of his gospel – to evoke and strengthen belief in Jesus (20:30–31). Our task, then, is to analyse in depth the various Johannine characters, particularly their responses to Jesus. Our aim, in keeping with that of John, is to challenge the readers to identify with one or more of the characters and to discover where they stand in relation to Jesus. Consequently, in this book we shall address the following questions. How does John portray and develop his characters, and how do we classify them? How does each character respond to Jesus? From the spectrum of responses John presents to his audience which ones are acceptable? If John sometimes presents characters as being unstable, complex and ambiguous (as Conway suggests), how do they operate in a dualistic world that only offers them the choices of belief and unbelief? How does all this affect us – today?

Regarding the scope of the study, there are two important limitations. First, we shall not study the protagonist, Jesus, but only those characters that interact with him.⁷⁶ We will only examine the so-called ‘active’ characters – those who encounter Jesus and make a particular belief-response to him (whether verbal or non-verbal). We will therefore ignore characters such as the master of ceremonies in 2:8–10, the adulterous woman in 7:53 – 8:11 and the soldiers in John 18 – 19 (they do not produce a response); Jesus’ biological brothers (the information is minimal – they simply disbelieve Jesus and are ‘from below’ [7:3–7]); Judas not Iscariot (he only occurs in 14:22); and Caiaphas (he is subsumed under ‘the Jews’). Second, this book focuses on the study of character rather than characterization. Characterization has to do with the author’s techniques of constructing character in the text, whereas we shall simply reconstruct character from the various indicators in the text.

We have two main sources of information for the analysis and reconstruction of Johannine characters: the character text (what characters say about themselves and others) and the narrator text (John’s commentary about the characters). We shall examine the following aspects: (i) the character’s actions; (ii) the character’s speech; (iii) what other characters say about that character; (iv) the narrator’s speech. In analysing the speech of the character and the narrator, we study both the content and style of that speech since *what* is said is sometimes determined by *how* it is said. It is therefore vital to recognize John’s literary techniques such as irony, misunderstanding, metaphor, symbolism and double entendre in order to get the point he wants to make. Besides, characterization in ancient literature is often indirect and

⁷⁶ For an excellent analysis of the Johannine Jesus, see M.W.G. Stibbe, ‘The Elusive Christ: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel’, *JSNT* 44 (1991): 19–37. Cf. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 106–12. Neither will we examine God, the Spirit-Paraclete or the narrator as characters.

therefore the reader must reconstruct the character's traits by *inference* or 'filling the gaps'.⁷⁷

We shall analyse and classify the Johannine characters along three dimensions (complexity, development, inner life) and plot the resulting character on a continuum of degree of characterization (from [agent to] type to personality to individuality). Besides analysing and classifying the characters themselves, we shall also evaluate their responses to Jesus as John calls us to do. Each chapter shall conclude with a more systematic collation of information about the character (complexity in terms of traits, development, inner life, degree of characterization and response to Jesus) that is dispersed throughout the exegetical sections of the chapter. We shall present our findings in the following table for each character:

| Name of Character | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Appearances | References |
| Identity | Titles given |
| | Gender |
| | Age |
| | Marital status |
| | Occupation |
| | Socio-economic status |
| | Place of residence/operation |
| | Relatives |
| | Group affiliation |
| Speech and actions | In interaction with Jesus |
| | In interaction with others |
| Character classification | Complexity |
| | Development |
| | Inner life |
| Degree of characterization | |
| Response to Jesus | |

After we have analysed all the characters, we will plot them in relation to one another – a comparative analysis (see ch. 25). We shall also categorize these characters according to their responses to Jesus since each character's response is typical, representing the response of a particular group of people – both then and now. Although many Johannine characters themselves cannot be reduced to 'types', their belief-responses function as such. These characters must therefore be analysed individually (they are not mere 'types') but also as part of John's larger theological framework in order to develop a taxonomy of responses to Jesus (the character's response to Jesus as typical). Besides, the characters in their entirety (traits, development and responses) are 'representative figures' in that they have a symbolic value or

⁷⁷ Cf. Bennema, 'Theory', 395, 397–8. Even in modern fiction a character's traits often has to be inferred from the text's deep structure.

paradigmatic function beyond the narrative, but not in the reductionist, 'typical' sense as most scholars maintain (see further ch. 25).

Concerning method, we will be guided primarily by the text of John's gospel as we have it today and use historical inquiry where necessary. This means that we shall use elements of literary-critical and historical-critical approaches. How we approach John's gospel is linked to the issue of where the meaning of a text is located. Traditionally, scholars approached John's gospel as a 'window' through which the reader could peer into the world behind the text. Such scholars have often used John's gospel to reconstruct the life-setting of the so-called Johannine community, which has led to many speculative theories.⁷⁸ According to those who take this approach, the characters in John's gospel represent certain historical groups of people in John's own time and setting.⁷⁹ However, with the increasing use of literary methods to read the Bible, people like Culpepper consider John's gospel as a 'mirror' in which meaning is produced by the reader in the act of reading. This book shall neither adopt nor reject these approaches in their entirety. Instead, we suggest another way of looking at John's gospel.

Although we do allow that the text shapes the reader's understanding in the act of reading, a reader cannot create any meaning she or he likes. In any intelligible verbal or non-verbal communication, the sender communicates a message to the receiver with the assumption that the receiver will understand the intended meaning of the sender. In written communication the intended meaning of the sender (the author) is located in the text itself and the recipient (the reader) must extract this authorial intention from the text. However, as modern readers we are separated from John's original audience by time, language and culture, and do not share the knowledge that John and his first readers had in common – their presupposition pool. Hence, at times we must reconstruct this presupposition pool to understand John's intended meaning. This reconstruction is possible through historical inquiry into the world of first-century Judaism from the sources available to us, which means that, where necessary, we shall go *beyond* the narrated world of the text. Our task as readers is to approach the intent of the author embedded in the text *and* its socio-historical context. This method can perhaps be called 'historical narrative criticism'.⁸⁰ Besides, since character is

⁷⁸ E.g. J.L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (3d edn; Louisville: WJK, 2003); R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London: Chapman, 1979). For a corrective understanding of the gospel's audience as a general Christian audience rather than a specific, geographically located community, see R. Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); E.W. Klink III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (SNTSMS 141; Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

⁷⁹ Brown, for instance, identifies seven historical groups of people (*Community*, 59–91).

⁸⁰ See also M.C. de Boer, 'Narrative Criticism, Historical Criticism, and the Gospel of John', *JSNT* 45 (1992): 35–48; S. Motyer, 'Method in Fourth Gospel Studies: A Way Out of the Impasse?', *JSNT* 66 (1997): 27–44; K.J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998); M. Turner, 'Historical Criticism and Theological Hermeneutics of the New Testament', in *Between Two Horizons:*

often inferred from the text, exegesis is the primary means for our character reconstruction.⁸¹ We have now laid the groundwork and turn to the main task – the study of the Johannine characters.

Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology (ed. J.B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 44–70. Although J.L. Resseguie presents a more 'mature' form of narrative criticism, stating that the narrative critic should be familiar with the cultural, linguistic, social and historical assumptions of the audience envisioned by the implied author, he nevertheless contends that this information must be obtained *from the text itself* rather than from outside the text (*Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 32, 39).

⁸¹ Exegesis is the process of the interpreter's understanding of the author's intended meaning of the text (cf. P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1989], 72).