

A THEORY OF CHARACTER IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL WITH REFERENCE TO ANCIENT AND MODERN LITERATURE

CORNELIS BENNEMA

South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies

Abstract

Both literary theory and biblical narrative criticism lack an articulate, comprehensive theory of character. Many Gospel critics 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 people also sharply distinguish between modern fiction and its psychological, individualistic approach to character and ancient characterization where character lacks personality or individuality. In Part I, we examine 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 better to speak of degrees of characterization along a continuum. In Part II, we develop a comprehensive theory of character in the Fourth Gospel, consisting of three aspects. First, we study character in text and context, using information in the text and other sources. Second, we 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). We observe that many Johannine characters are more complex and round than has been believed so far. Third, we analyse and evaluate the characters' responses to Jesus in relation to the Fourth Evangelist's evaluative point of view, purpose and dualistic worldview.

Keywords: character, Fourth Gospel, Gospel of John, narrative criticism, literary theory, ancient literature

A story has two main elements: events and characters.¹ Whereas much has been written on events and on the logical or causal sequence of events called 'plot', character appears to be the neglected child of literary theory. According to Seymour Chatman '[i]t is remarkable how little has been said about the theory of character in literary history and criticism.'² Similarly, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan remarks that 'the elaboration of a systematic, non-reductive but also non-impressionistic theory of character remains one of the challenges poetics has not yet met'.³ With few exceptions, literary criticism has not advanced beyond the well-known categories of 'flat' and 'round' coined by E.M. Forster in 1927 to classify characters. The absence of an articulate and comprehensive theory of character is partly due to Aristotle's idea that character is fixed and secondary to plot (cf. his *Poetics*, 6:7–21), on which twentieth-century Russian Formalism and French Structuralism have capitalized.⁴ Another reason is the complexity of the concept of character (characters resemble people but are not real people) and the difficulty of analysing character (something one can rarely read from the surface of the text).⁵

These observations also (or especially) hold true for narrative criticism of the Gospels which applies literary theory to biblical narratives. Fred Burnett, for example, points out that '[r]ecent work on narrative criticism of the Gospels has emphasized plot and story, but very little has been done with characterization. This is due mostly to the disarray of the theoretical discussion about

¹ S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 19; S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2nd edn, 2002 [1st edn, 1983]), pp. 3, 6. This division was already made by Aristotle (*Poetics*, 6:7–8).

² Chatman, *Story*, p. 107.

³ Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, p. 29.

⁴ Many modern writers have even pronounced the death of character (see Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, pp. 29–31). For them there is obviously no incentive to develop a theory of character.

⁵ Cf. M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (trans. C. van Boheemen; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 80.

characterization in current literary criticism.’⁶ François Tolmie comments that the lack of a uniform approach to characterization in biblical narratives is understandable because ‘contemporary literary criticism has not yet provided a systematic and comprehensive theory for the analysis of character’.⁷ In Gospel criticism, character study is thus still in its infancy. Many biblical critics assume that the Aristotelian view of character was dominant in all of ancient Greek literature and also influenced the Gospel narratives. When it comes to the Fourth Gospel, the majority of scholars treat most of its characters (if not all) as ‘flat’ or ‘types’ (with the exception of Jesus),⁸ whereas our study will show that most Johannine characters are more complex and ‘round’. In addition, many scholars approach character in the Fourth Gospel without clarifying their understanding of character, how they analyse characters or classify them.⁹ And amongst those who do give their character studies some theoretical undergirding, there is no consensus on the approach to character.¹⁰

The aim of this study, therefore, is to formulate a comprehensive theory of character in the Fourth Gospel – a theoretical framework that enables and validates a sound, non-reductive interpretation of the Johannine characters. The questions that this study will address are: How should we analyse, reconstruct and classify the characters in the Fourth Gospel? How should we analyse the characters’ responses to Jesus within the dualistic worldview of the Fourth Gospel? Can we apply modern literary methods of fiction to non-fictional biblical narratives? In taking up these questions, we will examine character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature as well as modern fiction. We will especially consider ancient Greek literature since many (biblical) scholars still view characters in this body of literature as types. They have apparently not assimilated the findings of experts on ancient Greek literature such as Jacqueline de Romilly, Christopher Pelling, Patricia Easterling, Christopher Gill and Simon Goldhill.

⁶ F.W. Burnett, ‘Characterization and Reader Construction of Characters in the Gospels’, *Semeia* 63 (1993), pp. 3–28 (3).

⁷ D.F. Tolmie, *Jesus’ Farewell to the Disciples: John 13:1–17:26 in Narratological Perspective* (BIS, 12; Leiden: Brill, 1995) pp. 117–118 (quotation from p. 118).

⁸ For example, E. Krafft, ‘Die Personen des Johannesevangeliums’, *Evangelische Theologie* 16 (1956), pp. 18–32; R.F. Collins, ‘Representative Figures’, in R.F. Collins, *These Things Have Been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* ([originally in *Downside Review* 94 (1976), pp. 26–46; 95 (1976), pp. 118–132]; Louvain/Grand Rapids: Peeters/Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 1–45; R.F. Collins, ‘From John to the Beloved Disciples: An Essay on Johannine characters’, *Interpretation* 49 (1995), pp. 359–369; R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. 102, 104, 145; M. Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference in the Fourth Gospel* (JSNTS, 69; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 157, 332, 338; Tolmie, *Farewell*, pp. 142–143; C.R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2nd edn, 2003), pp. 33, 35, 37.

⁹ Krafft, Collins, Davies (see n. 8 for details); R.G. Maccini, *Her Testimony is True: Women as Witnesses according to John* (JSNTS, 125; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); 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); R. Edwards, *Discovering John* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003), ch. 10; M.M. Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals* (JSNTS, 242; London: SAP, 2003); J.M. Howard, ‘The Significance of Minor Characters in the Gospel of John’, *BibSac* 163 (2006), pp. 63–78.

¹⁰ For example, Culpepper contends that the Fourth Gospel draws from both Greek and Hebrew models of character, although most Johannine characters are ethical types (as in Greek narrative). He also uses the modern character classifications of Forster and Harvey (*Anatomy*, pp. 102–104). M.W.G. Stibbe contends that the Fourth Evangelist uses Hebrew narrative techniques (*John’s Gospel* [London/New York: Routledge, 1994], pp. 10–11), while Koester and Brant look at ancient Greek drama or tragedy for their understanding of character in the Fourth Gospel (Koester, *Symbolism*, pp. 36–39; J.A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004], pp. 159–232). Tolmie relies mainly on the modern theories of Rimmon-Kenan and Ewen for his understanding and classification of character, but also refers to Chatman, Forster, Harvey and Greimas (*Farewell*, pp. 23–26, 117–124, 141–144). Rejecting three methods of character analysis (Forster’s psychological model, Greimas’s structuralist approach and Fokkema’s semiotic approach), D.R. Beck adopts J. Darr’s model, which is influenced by the reader-oriented theory of W. Iser and which considers how characterization entices readers into fuller participation in the narrative (*The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* [BIS, 27; Leiden: Brill, 1997], pp. 6–8). In her discussion of character, C.M. Conway builds on insights from both modern literary theory (esp. Chatman and Hochman) and Hebrew characterization (*Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* [SBLDS, 167; Atlanta: SBL, 1999], pp. 50–63). J.L. Resseguie examines only one aspect of character in the Fourth Gospel, namely point of view (*The Strange Gospel: Narrative Design and Point of View in John* [BIS, 56; Leiden: Brill, 2001], pp. 109–168).

Our study has two limitations. First, we will focus on character rather than characterization. That is, we shall attempt to understand what character is and how the reader can reconstruct character from indicators in the text, whereas characterization refers to the author's techniques of constructing character, how the various indicators have been put along the text continuum.¹¹ The second limitation is that we will not study the Johannine characters as such but simply refer to some to underline or illuminate our argument. The actual application of our theory of character to the Fourth Gospel will happen in another work, in which we study all the characters that interact with Jesus.¹²

I. Character in Ancient and Modern Literature

We must provide a rationale for looking at ancient Hebrew and Greek literature as well as modern fiction for a theory of character in the Fourth Gospel. First, the present consensus is that the Fourth Gospel is firmly Jewish and therefore we may assume that the Fourth Evangelist was familiar with characterization in the Hebrew bible. At the same time, the Fourth Gospel was most probably composed in a multi-cultural city in the Diaspora and therefore the Fourth Evangelist might also have had a good understanding of characterization in Graeco-Roman literature. After all, all of first-century Judaism – in both Palestine and the Diaspora – had been permeated to various degrees by Hellenistic culture.¹³ It is therefore not surprising that although the genre of the Gospels is *sui generis* Gospel critics have almost reached a consensus that the Gospels also belong or correspond to the Graeco-Roman βίος.¹⁴ Burnett even states that, due to a lack of comparable presentation of character in Jewish literature, Gospel critics have been forced to turn to Greek classical literature for the study of character.¹⁵

Regarding our rationale for looking at modern fiction, narrative criticism of the Gospels is derived from contemporary literary theory. In addition, since character and characterization are subjects of literary inquiry we assume that we can gain insights from the study of character in modern literary theory. At the same time, however, we may be in danger of comparing apples and oranges. Many critics contend that character and characterization in ancient and modern literature are very different, and that within ancient literature character in the Hebrew bible differs greatly from that in Greek literature. Hence, we must examine whether it is legitimate to apply modern methods used in fiction to ancient narratives and whether we can compare Hebrew and Greek literature regarding character.

Character in Hebrew Biblical Narrative

Looking at ancient narrative literature, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg comment that '[c]haracters in primitive stories are invariably "flat," "static," and quite "opaque"' and '[t]he

¹¹ For the concept and practice of characterization, see for example Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, ch. 5; J.F. Williams, *Other Followers of Jesus: Minor Characters as Major Figures in Mark's Gospel* (JSNTS, 102; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 60–67.

¹² C. Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes/Colorado Springs: Paternoster, forthcoming 2009).

¹³ This has been forcefully argued by M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (2 vols.; London: SCM Press, 1974).

¹⁴ The compelling case for this has been provided by R.A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2004). Cf. D.E. Aune, 'Greco-Roman Biography', in D.E. Aune (ed.), *Graeco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres* (SBLSPS, 21; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 107–126; G. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford: OUP, 2nd edn, 2002), pp. 14–18; J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (volume 1 of *Christianity in the Making*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 184–186; R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 276. Among those who are sceptical of viewing the Gospels as ancient βίος is P. Stuhlmacher, 'The Genre(s) of the Gospels', in D.L. Dungan (ed.), *The Interrelations of the Gospels* (BETL, 95; Leuven: University Press, 1990), pp. 484–494. Burridge responds to some critical reviews of his position in his *Gospels*, ch. 11.

¹⁵ Burnett, 'Characterization', pp. 7–8.

inward life is assumed but not presented in primitive narrative literature, whether Hebraic or Hellenic'.¹⁶ This view, however, has not prevailed amongst critics of Hebrew narrative, due to the influential works of scholars such as Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, Meir Sternberg and Shimon Bar-Efrat.¹⁷ Alter argues that the bible's sparse portrayal of character in fact creates scope for a variety of possible interpretations of human individuality because '[w]e are compelled to get at character and motive...through a process of inference from fragmentary data, often with crucial pieces of narrative exposition strategically withheld, and this leads to multiple or sometimes even wavering perspectives on the characters.'¹⁸ Both Alter and Sternberg have developed the idea that the author's reticence in characterization invites (even requires) the reader to reconstruct character through inference, through 'filling the gaps'.¹⁹ In addition, since information about a character is conveyed primarily through indirect characterization, i.e., through the subject's speech and actions rather than inward speech or statements by the narrator, we are essentially left in the realm of inference.²⁰ Sternberg emphasizes that the reader's task of gap-filling is legitimate and by no means an arbitrary process since any hypothesis must be validated by the text.²¹

Alter also asserts that Hebrew characters who are treated at any length exhibit the capacity for change, and this developing and transforming nature of character is one reason why biblical characters cannot be reduced to fixed Homeric types – Jacob is not simply 'wily Jacob', Moses is not 'sagacious Moses'.²² Sternberg affirms that biblical characters can display change, unpredictability, ambiguity, complexity and surprise.²³ Indeed, characters such as Jacob, Joseph, Saul or David can hardly be labelled as 'static', 'type' or 'flat'. In fact, Sternberg observes that '[c]onsidering the range of the Bible's portrait gallery, it is amazing how distinct and memorable its figures remain, without benefit of formal portrayal. And this is largely due to the surplus of inner life expressed in act and speech.'²⁴ Alter aptly concludes that 'the underlying biblical conception of character as often unpredictable, in some ways impenetrable, constantly emerging from and slipping back into a penumbra of ambiguity, in fact has greater affinity with dominant modern notions than do the habits of conceiving character typical of the Greek epics.'²⁵

Regarding the relation between character and plot, Sternberg argues that character is not subordinated to plot (as in Aristotle's view and modern structuralism) but that there is a two-way traffic between them, an inferential movement from character to action to character.²⁶

Character in Ancient Greek Literature

Aristotle's view on character as fixed and subordinate (even inessential) to the plot is well known (see, for example, his *Poetics*, 6:7–21). Rather than the modern idea that people's character may develop through their actions and thought, and through external factors, for Aristotle, character is unchanging: 'character is people's nature/qualities' (*Poetics*, 6:12) and 'character is that which reveals moral choice' (*Poetics*, 6:24). Aristotle's 'character' or ἦθος comes close to the modern

¹⁶ R. Scholes and R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: OUP, 1966), pp. 164–167 (quotations from p. 164 and p. 166 respectively).

¹⁷ R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981); A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983); M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTS, 70; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

¹⁸ Alter, *Art*, pp. 114–115, 126 (quotation taken from p. 126).

¹⁹ Alter, *Art*, ch. 6; Sternberg, *Poetics*, ch. 6. Cf. Bar-Efrat, *Art*, ch. 2; Berlin, *Poetics*, pp. 33–42.

²⁰ Cf. Alter, *Art*, pp. 116–117. Bar-Efrat points out that in real life too we usually infer people's character from what they say and do (*Art*, p. 89).

²¹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, pp. 188–189.

²² Alter, *Art*, p. 126.

²³ Sternberg, *Poetics*, pp. 323–328. Cf. Bar-Efrat, *Art*, pp. 86–92.

²⁴ Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 329. For examples of characters' inner life, see Bar-Efrat, *Art*, pp. 53–64.

²⁵ Alter, *Art*, p. 129. Although Alter's conclusion holds true for Homeric characters, later Greek literature was capable of more complex portrayals of character with aspects of inner life and development (see our next section).

²⁶ Sternberg, *Poetics*, pp. 342–346.

notion of disposition, people's inherent qualities that influence their thought and actions.²⁷ Aristotle's notion of character corresponds to the modern category 'flat' or 'type'.²⁸ Many Gospel critics have accepted this Aristotelian view of character as static, consistent ethical (stereo)types to represent the whole of ancient Greek thought – over against character development in ancient Hebrew narrative and modern fiction.²⁹ Christopher Gill succinctly encapsulates the issue:

It is often claimed that in the ancient world character was believed to be something fixed, given at birth and immutable during life. This belief is said to underlie the portrayal of individuals in ancient historiography and biography, particularly in the early Roman Empire; and to constitute the chief point of difference in psychological assumptions between ancient and modern biography.³⁰

We will demonstrate, however, that we need not accept Aristotle's view of character in Greek tragedy as true or representative of ancient Greek literature at large but that character can be more complex and take on more dimensions than Aristotle has us believe.

The earliest example of character advancing beyond the category 'flat' or 'type' is found in classical Attic tragedy of the fifth century BCE. Examining Sophocles' tragedies *Ajax* and *Antigone*, Albin Lesky finds it unsatisfactory to label their respective protagonists Ajax and Antigone as 'types' but the term 'round' is also inadequate since they lack the abundance of individual features that can be seen of modern characters.³¹ Lesky suggests the following way out of the dilemma:

To understand the great figures of the Attic stage, especially those of Sophocles, we must realise that neither the usual concept 'type' nor that of individual character brings us any nearer...They are not determined by typical features that can be repeated at will, but entirely by their own fundamental qualities, and it is this which makes it a great experience to encounter them. We have rejected the terms 'type' and 'character' (in the modern sense); perhaps the best definition is the classical concept of 'personality' as expressed by Herbert Cysarz: 'Personality instead of just interesting individuality, a norm instead of the original and the bizarre.'³²

Christopher Gill also ascribes 'personality' to Sophocles' Ajax, in which he associates 'personality' (i) with a response to people that is empathetic (i.e., understanding someone by placing oneself in the other person) rather than moral (i.e., evaluating a person from the outside in terms of vice and virtue), and (ii) with a concern with the person as an individual rather than as the bearer of character traits which are assessed by reference to general moral terms.³³

Jacqueline de Romilly makes similar observations, arguing that Sophocles employs a vivid and nuanced characterization in which characters can take a variety of positions that are often in direct conflict with one another.³⁴ She says, for example, 'Sophocles does not simply choose an ideal to embody in Antigone; he puts a living Antigone before us. Yet at every juncture of the plot he

²⁷ According to BAGD (3rd edn), ἥθος is 'a pattern of behavior or practice that is habitual or characteristic of a group or an individual' – a custom, usage or habit.

²⁸ Theophrastus, a disciple of Aristotle, developed his master's ideas in his *Characters* (late fourth century BCE). *Traits* would actually be a better translation of this work since the Greek title χαρακτήρ means 'a characteristic trait or manner' (BAGD [3rd edn]), and ἥθος is normally used to translate 'character' (although not with the modern psychological sense of character). *Characters* contains thirty chapters, each describing and elaborating on a single trait so that Theophrastus' 'characters' are effectively types (cf. J. Rusten, Introduction to Theophrastus, *Characters* [LCL, 225; J. Rusten (ed. and trans.); Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002], pp. 5–13).

²⁹ See, for example, Culpepper, *Anatomy*, p. 103; Koester, *Symbolism*, pp. 36–37; P. Merenlahti, 'Characters in the Making: Individuality and Ideology in the Gospels', in D. Rhoads and K. Syreeni (eds.), *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism* (JSNTS, 184; Sheffield: SAP, 1999), pp. 49–72 (51); O. Lehtipuu, 'Characterization and Persuasion: The Rich Man and the Poor Man in Luke 16.19–31', in D. Rhoads and K. Syreeni (eds.), *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism* (JSNTS, 184; Sheffield: SAP, 1999), pp. 73–105 (75); A. Smith, 'Tyranny Exposed: Mark's Typological Characterization of Herod Antipas (Mark 6:14–29)', *Biblical Interpretation* 14 (2006), pp. 259–293 (263–264).

³⁰ C. Gill, 'The Question of Character-Development: Plutarch and Tacitus', *Classical Quarterly* 33 (1983), pp. 469–487 (469).

³¹ A. Lesky, *Greek Tragedy* (London: Ernest Benn, 2nd edn, 1967), pp. 123–124.

³² Lesky, *Tragedy*, p. 124 (my emphasis).

³³ C. Gill, 'The Character-Personality Distinction', in C.B.R. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 1–31 (2, 19–20).

³⁴ J. de Romilly, *A Short History of Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 71–72.

manages to reveal in her a set of principles and an ideal of proper conduct that together make up her unique personality.³⁵ As Simon Goldhill asserts, Greek tragedy may not have the same notion of character as the modern novel, but this does not mean that Greek tragedy has no interest in any inner life of its characters.³⁶ Patricia Easterling, arguing that Sophocles depicts his characters as life-like individuals, even concludes that ‘in the matter of characterization the differences between Sophocles and modern dramatists are ultimately unimportant...there is nothing in modern drama that does not have its counterpart in his plays’.³⁷

Although the Sophoclean characters could thus have ‘personality’, Lesky argues that they were unable to change since Sophocles adhered to the basic idea in ancient Greek culture that the inherent qualities of people (their φύσις) determined their character once and for all. The idea of development or change in a character, Lesky continues, was only introduced by Euripides, after a revolution in ideas about human nature.³⁸ Goldhill differs however. According to him, Sophocles’ Ajax for example is not stereotyped but undergoes change: rather than the fixed ἦθος that Ajax had proclaimed for himself he goes beyond the norm, seems inconsistent, ‘out of character’.³⁹ Although it is debatable whether we can speak of a real change or development in character in Sophocles, it appears that Sophoclean characters could fluctuate between flat and round, static and dynamic, and Lesky’s suggested category of personality may be appropriate.⁴⁰

In Euripides’ *Medea*, the central figure Medea displays a tragic conflict within herself and the intensity of her inner experiences, oscillating between furious passion (θυμός) and thoughtful reflection (βουλευματα) (*Medea*, 1079), is unequalled in Attic tragedy.⁴¹ Medea’s intense dialogue with herself in *Medea* 1019–1080, for example, reveals her inner life with all its psychological reversals, not unlike a modern character.⁴² In Euripides’ later plays, such as *Electra* and *Orestes*, Kitto sees characters ‘who are regarded purely as individuals, not in any degrees as types, or tragic and exemplary embodiments of some universal passion’.⁴³ In his later plays, Euripides shows a radical new valuation of humankind: (i) in *Electra*, *Orestes* and *Ion*, environment and education are the decisive factors for one’s character rather than one’s φύσις; (ii) in *Antiope*, the contrast between the two brothers Amphion and Zethus reflects the important split between thought and action – thought no longer being the servant of action.⁴⁴ The implication is that characters can change or develop: the characters’ outer environment can influence inner thought and move them to a particular action rather than that they act necessarily or solely out of their φύσις. Lesky thus

³⁵ De Romilly, *History*, p. 73. Cf. P.E. Easterling, who examines the interest in the ‘inner life’ of the main characters of the *Antigone* (‘Constructing Character in Greek Tragedy’, in C.B.R. Pelling [ed.], *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], pp. 83–99 [93–99]).

³⁶ S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), pp. 168–174.

³⁷ P.E. Easterling, ‘Character in Sophocles’, *Greece and Rome* 24 (1977), pp. 121–129 (quotation from p. 129).

³⁸ Lesky, *Tragedy*, pp. 125–126.

³⁹ Goldhill, *Tragedy*, pp. 181–189. Inconsistency goes against Aristotle’s understanding of proper character (*Poetics*, 15:6).

⁴⁰ A related issue is the appearance of a hero in multiple plays by the same writer or by different writers. Goldhill, for example, argues that Sophocles might have drawn on the Ajax in Homer’s *Iliad* and developed him. Characters of Greek drama draw on, define themselves through, and develop in relation to other texts (*Tragedy*, p. 188). Similarly, Creon appears in three of Sophocles’ plays, and Burnett wonders how to compare the docile and passive Creon of the *Antigone* with the active and tyrannical Creon in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the brazen liar Creon in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Burnett then suggests that for ancient audiences oral traditions and private and public discussions about Creon may have contributed to Creon’s change of character between plays (‘Characterization’, pp. 13–14).

⁴¹ Lesky, *Tragedy*, pp. 146–147. Cf. C. Garton, ‘Characterisation in Greek Tragedy’, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77 (1957), pp. 247–254 (254). D.B. Gowler asserts that ‘[t]he transition in Greek tragedy from portraying characters as types to depicting them as individuals reached its apex with Euripides’ (*Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend: Portraits of the Pharisees in Luke and Acts* [ESEC, 2; New York: Peter Lang, 1991], p. 103). Gill also sees ‘personality’ in Euripides’ *Medea* (‘Distinction’, pp. 27–28).

⁴² Cf. de Romilly, *History*, p. 79.

⁴³ H.D.F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* (London: Methuen, 2nd edn, 1950), p. 258.

⁴⁴ Lesky, *Tragedy*, pp. 171–173, 188–189. Cf. J. Griffin, who finds that in the late Euripidean play *Iphigeneia* the characters are capable of contrasting emotions and abrupt changes of mind (‘Characterization in Euripides: *Hippolytus* and *Iphigeneia in Aulis*’, in C.B.R. Pelling [ed.], *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], pp. 128–149 [140–149]).

concludes that '[t]his lively interplay between external changes and the characters' internal reactions represents a line of development that begins with the increased dramatic movement of Sophocles and brings us close to modern drama.'⁴⁵

We do not know much about post-classic Hellenistic tragedy of the fourth and third century BCE, but Lesky considers it probable that the preoccupation with psychological portrayal of characters which we saw in Euripides continued or even increased.⁴⁶ Alongside tragedy, the genre of comedy came up in the second half of the fifth century and in the fourth century BCE, which could sporadically resemble character in tragedy. De Romilly thus observes that Menander, who belonged to New Comedy, replaced politics (characteristic of Old Comedy) by psychology, and although he mainly used typecast characters, they exhibited variety and subtle psychological nuances.⁴⁷

Two new genres of Greek literature appeared in the Roman era: biography, which takes its place beside history, and romance or the novel.⁴⁸ In a widely acclaimed study, Richard Burridge makes a convincing case for viewing the Gospels as Graeco-Roman βίοι.⁴⁹ Examining ten Graeco-Roman βίοι from the fourth century BCE to the third century CE, he observes that ancient characterization was much more indirect than its modern counterparts, revealing character primarily through the subject's words and deeds rather than by direct, psychological analysis.⁵⁰ Regarding early Graeco-Roman βίοι, pre-dating the Gospels, Burridge argues that although there is interest in the individual (otherwise there would be no βίος), most characters are stereotyped as examples of general, ethical qualities.⁵¹ Regarding βίοι that are later than the Gospels, he concludes that although we should not look for modern concepts of character in these βίοι, 'we may find some quite carefully drawn characters – some stereotypical and others more realistic – emerging through the narratives'.⁵² Burridge asserts that in Plutarch's *Lives*, for example, there is evidence of character change.⁵³

Comparing Plutarch's biographical theory and practice, Christopher Pelling makes similar observations. He observes that although the concern in Plutarch's *Lives* is character (ἦθος) and their ultimate purpose is protreptic and moral, in some of the *Lives* Plutarch displays real psychological interest in the characters.⁵⁴ Regarding *Antony*, for example, Pelling notes that, after the entrance of Cleopatra, Plutarch's moralism becomes rather different from crude remarks of praise and blame: 'It is the moralism of a sympathetic insight into human frailty; the moralism which, like the tragic aspects of *Pompey*, points a truth of human nature.'⁵⁵

With regard to Graeco-Roman biographies and historiographies, Christopher Gill examines the issue of character development in the first-century writings of Plutarch and Tacitus. Plutarch's ἦθος means 'character' in an evaluative sense (like Aristotle's ἦθος) in that his point of view is highly evaluative, passing moral judgement on great people of the past and thus providing the reader with examples of behaviour to imitate and avoid.⁵⁶ However, contra Aristotle, this does not necessarily mean that Plutarch's characters are flat, static or typecast. Quite the reverse. Like Pelling, Gill argues that Plutarch's moral essays show clear signs of the possibility of the development of character, in that the progress of life can introduce changes in one's adult character.⁵⁷ Gill adds that

⁴⁵ Lesky, *Tragedy*, p. 190.

⁴⁶ Lesky, *Tragedy*, pp. 202–205.

⁴⁷ De Romilly, *History*, pp. 168–169. Cf. Lesky, *Tragedy*, p. 207.

⁴⁸ De Romilly, *History*, p. 191. Although the historians of the Roman age (e.g., Diodorus, Josephus, Tacitus, Dio Cassius, Eusebius) had considerable influence, they were inferior to the great Greek historians of the fifth century like Herodotus and Thucydides (de Romilly, *History*, pp. 197–202).

⁴⁹ Burridge, *Gospels* (see n. 14 for details).

⁵⁰ Burridge, *Gospels*, pp. 117, 139, 172.

⁵¹ Burridge, *Gospels*, p. 144.

⁵² Burridge, *Gospels*, p. 179.

⁵³ Burridge, *Gospels*, p. 178.

⁵⁴ C.B.R. Pelling, 'Plutarch's Adaptation of His Source-Material', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 100 (1980), pp. 127–140 (135–138).

⁵⁵ Pelling, 'Plutarch's Adaptation', p. 138.

⁵⁶ Gill, 'Character-Development', pp. 472–473.

⁵⁷ Gill, 'Character-Development', pp. 474–475. In fact, Plutarch seems to regard two kinds of character development acceptable: (i) the development of a child or youth towards a good or bad adult character; (ii) the process of an adult to

in Tacitus too we find the idea of the development of the adult character.⁵⁸ Gill warns us against two extremities. On the one hand, although there was a general awareness in the Graeco-Roman culture of that time that the adult character depended on a combination of factors (innate qualities as well as upbringing and influences of individuals and of society at large) – and could therefore develop – this is not fully reflected in the historiography and biography of that time but merely lightly sketched. On the other hand, it is a gross over-simplification that ancient writers were incapable of conceiving the notion of change of character.⁵⁹

Examining characterization in the ancient novel, Alain Billault observes that although novelists at times draw on characters in comedy, they also delineate new types of characters. Some characters are given personal features, such as a name and the novelists often make psychological remarks beyond the stereotyped categories ‘good’ or ‘bad’, thereby providing the character with a true psychological existence that comes close to ordinary people.⁶⁰ For example, Chariton and Heliodorus can depict characters that are ‘a complex whole of various qualities and contradictions, which seems to be the real thing’; Longus can subtly describe characters’ psychology; and Achilles Tatius’ protagonists often employ self-deprecating humour.⁶¹ In addition, Billault observes that character development through suffering is a favourite theme in the ancient novel; some heroes are not the same persons in the end as they were in the beginning of the story.⁶²

Character in Modern Fiction

Aristotle’s concept of character as type and subordinate to plot has been further developed by Russian Formalists (e.g., V. Propp) and French Structuralists (e.g., A.J. Greimas), arguing that characters are merely plot functionaries. In Greimas’s well-known actantial model, characters are subordinated to action, thereby reduced to mere actants or agents.⁶³ If the focus is on actions and plot, an actantial analysis may be beneficial but for a study of characters Greimas’s approach is too reductionistic. To demote, for example, all the Johannine characters to merely six actants will not capture the complexity and variety of the cast of the Fourth Gospel. Seymour Chatman challenges this Aristotelian or structuralist approach to character, arguing that plot and character are equally important.⁶⁴ Similarly, Rimmon-Kenan suggests that character and plot are interdependent.⁶⁵

Chatman carries on developing an ‘open theory’ of character. He disagrees that characters in fiction are mere words restricted to the text; rather, characters should be treated as autonomous

improve his character, in some cases by conscious correction of deficiencies. What Plutarch finds problematic is when a good adult character turns bad (Gill, ‘Character-Development’, p. 478). In turn, Pelling affirms Gill’s findings and concludes that Plutarch had ‘a considerable interest in “personality”’ (‘Childhood and Personality in Greek Biography’, in C.B.R. Pelling [ed.], *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], pp. 213–244 [225–244 (quotation from p. 228)]).

⁵⁸ Gill, ‘Character-Development’, pp. 475–476. Cf. Gowler, who concludes that in Tacitus’ *Annals* the characters ‘can represent types – such as the sage, tyrant, or informer – but many come to be individuals in their own right’ (*Host*, p. 143).

⁵⁹ Gill, ‘Character-Development’, pp. 476–477, 482. Somewhat similarly, Burnett argues that there is evidence from non-literary sources that there was a move from the typical to the individual in the ancient Greek and Roman world, which would perhaps then allow the reader to construct a character’s individuality (‘Characterization’, pp. 11–12). Nevertheless, Easterling warns that the Greeks were interested in individuals as part of a community rather than in the individual’s unique private experience found in modern literature (‘Character’, p. 129).

⁶⁰ A. Billault, ‘Characterization in the Ancient Novel’, in G. Schmeling (ed.), *The Novel in the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 115–129 (118, 122–125).

⁶¹ Billault, ‘Characterization’, pp. 125–126. Cf. T. Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 9, 16; Gowler, *Host*, p. 167.

⁶² Billault, ‘Characterization’, pp. 127–128. Examples of characters who develop through suffering are Chaereas in Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Theagenes in Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica*, Lucius in Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*, and Callisthenes in Achilles Tatius’ *Leucippe and Clitophon* (Billault, ‘Characterization’, p. 128; Hägg, *Novel*, p. 53; cf. de Romilly, *History*, pp. 205–206).

⁶³ A.J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale: Recherche de méthode* (Paris: Larousse, 1966).

⁶⁴ Chatman, *Story*, pp. 108–116.

⁶⁵ Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, pp. 34–36. Cf. S.D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 15.

beings that we try to figure out.⁶⁶ He maintains that to curb ‘a God-given right to infer and even to speculate about characters’ would be ‘an impoverishment of aesthetic experience’.⁶⁷ Chatman does not however confuse fiction and reality: characters do not have ‘lives’ beyond the text but we endow them with ‘personality’ only to the extent that they are familiar to us from real life.⁶⁸ Therefore, Chatman argues, we reconstruct character by inferring traits from the information in the text.⁶⁹ Chatman points out two important features of trait: (i) often the trait is not explicitly named in the text but must be inferred; (ii) since readers rely upon their knowledge of the trait-name in the real world, traits are culturally coded.⁷⁰ This then leads Chatman to define character as ‘a paradigm of traits’, in which trait is a ‘relatively stable or abiding personal quality’.⁷¹ Rimmon-Kenan agrees with Chatman to a great extent, but she realizes that Chatman’s character as ‘a paradigm of traits’ may become too static a construct, and therefore she also allows for a developmental dimension of character: ‘When, in the process of reconstruction, the reader reaches a point where he can no longer integrate an element within a constructed category, the implication would seem...that the character has changed.’⁷²

One of the earliest and most well-known classifications of characters in literary criticism is E.M. Forster’s categories of ‘flat’ and ‘round’ character. Flat characters or types are built around a single trait and do not develop, whereas round characters are complex characters that have multiple traits and can develop in the course of action. Forster’s criterion for deciding whether a character is round or flat is whether it is capable of surprising the reader.⁷³ W.J. Harvey uses the categories of protagonists (the central characters in the narrative), cards (characters who support and illuminate the protagonists), ficelles (typical characters who serve certain plot functions) and background characters (characters who serve a mechanical role in the plot or act as chorus).⁷⁴ Whereas Forster classifies characters according to traits and development, Harvey classifies them according to narrative presence or importance.⁷⁵ This implies that Harvey’s classification does not improve our understanding of the characters themselves but only of how active they are in the plot. If we accept Chatman’s definition of character as a paradigm of traits, Forster’s ‘psychological’ classification has scope but is still too reductionistic since not every character would neatly fit into either one of his categories.⁷⁶

⁶⁶ Chatman, *Story*, pp. 116–119. Cf. Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, p. 33.

⁶⁷ Chatman, *Story*, p. 117.

⁶⁸ Chatman, *Story*, pp. 137–138. Cf. Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, p. 33; Billault, ‘Characterization’, p. 115. Johannine scholar M.M. Thompson comments that in character reconstruction readers use their conceptions of real people (including emotional and imaginative responses) and often use language that belongs more to the realm of psychology and human development (‘“God’s Voice You Have Never Heard, God’s Form You Have Never Seen”: The Characterization of God in the Gospel of John’, *Semeia* 63 [1993], pp. 177–204 [182–183]).

⁶⁹ Chatman, *Story*, pp. 119–120. Cf. Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, pp. 36, 59, 128–130. The reader’s need to infer character-traits from the information dispersed in the text goes back to Wolfgang Iser (‘The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach’, *New Literary History* 3 [1972], pp. 279–299 [284–285]). Rimmon-Kenan contends that a gap in the text ‘need not entail a corresponding gap in the story’ but in fact ‘enhances interest and curiosity, prolongs the reading process, and contributes to the reader’s dynamic participation in making the text signify’ (*Fiction*, p. 130).

⁷⁰ Chatman, *Story*, pp. 123–125. For example, from John 13:36–38 and 18:10–11 we may infer that Peter speaks and acts before he thinks, and name this trait ‘impulsive’ without the text ever mentioning this word. Or if someone habitually produces an eructation after meals, we may assign the trait ‘impolite’ whereas in some cultures this is entirely acceptable or even appreciated.

⁷¹ Chatman, *Story*, p. 126. Elsewhere, Chatman defines trait more extensively as ‘a narrative adjective out of the vernacular labeling a personal quality of a character, as it persists over part or whole of the story’ (*Story*, p. 125).

⁷² Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, p. 39. Although Chatman does not focus on the developing character, he does realize that a character’s traits can change in that a trait may emerge earlier or later in the course of the story, or it may disappear and be replaced by another trait (*Story*, p. 126).

⁷³ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Penguin, 1976 [orig. publ. 1927]), pp. 73–81.

⁷⁴ W.J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), pp. 52–73.

⁷⁵ Cf. D. Marguerat and Y. Bourquin, *How to Read Bible Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Criticism* (London: SCM Press, 1999), p. 60.

⁷⁶ For a critique of Forster, see Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, pp. 40–41; M.W.G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (SNTSMS, 73; Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 24; Tolmie, *Farewell*, pp. 122–123.

This has caused some people to further refine Forster's classification. Berlin, for example, uses the categories of full-fledged character (Forster's round character), type (Forster's flat character) and agent (the plot functionary), but she considers these categories as *degrees* of characterization rather than fixed categories.⁷⁷ Rimmon-Kenan draws attention to the more advanced classification of Yosef Ewen, who advocates three continua or axes upon which a character may be situated:

- Complexity: characters may vary from those displaying a single trait to those displaying a complex nexus of traits, and in between there can be various degrees of complexity.
- Development: characters may vary from those who show no development to those who are fully developed characters.
- Penetration into the inner life: characters may vary from those who are seen only from the outside (their minds remain opaque) to those whose consciousness is presented from within.⁷⁸

Some biblical scholars hold the same position. Sternberg and Bar-Efrat, for example, perceive biblical characters to move along a continuum rather than to exist as two contingencies, either flat or round.⁷⁹ Similarly, Burnett concludes that 'it would seem wise to understand characterization, for any biblical text at least, on a continuum. This would imply for narratives like the Gospels that the focus should be on the *degree* of characterization rather than on characterization as primarily typical'.⁸⁰ The classification of characters as points along a continuum is a significant development but the question of how such a continuum should look has not been resolved.

The last concept we must mention in relation to character study is point of view. Any meaningful communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, has a particular purpose, a message that the sender wants to get across to the receiver. In line with its purpose, a story is told or written from a particular perspective. This is called 'point of view'.⁸¹ Stephen Moore defines point of view as 'the rhetorical activity of an author as he or she attempts, from a position within some socially shared system of assumptions and convictions, to impose a story-world upon an audience by the manipulation of narrative perspective'.⁸² James Resseguie states that '[i]t is the *mode* or *angle of vision* from which characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and events are considered or observed. But also point of view is the narrator's *attitude towards* or *evaluation of* characters, dialogue, actions, setting and events'.⁸³ We may call this *evaluative* point of view. Important questions are: How does the narrator communicate an ideology through point of view? What point of view does he want the reader to adopt?⁸⁴ Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin have captured the dynamic behind point of view well. They explain that since characters in a narrative offer the reader a possible form of life or existence, the narrative creates space for the reader to identify with the characters. This identification of the reader with the characters is secretly directed by the narrator. The narrator tries to influence for his own ends the interaction that occurs between the reader and the characters, counting on 'a permanent mechanism of reading which is partly unconscious: the evaluation of the characters'.⁸⁵ The implication is that a narrative is not neutral since it has an inbuilt perspective.

⁷⁷ Berlin, *Poetics*, pp. 23, 32. However, even Forster admits that a flat character could acquire 'roundness' (*Aspects*, pp. 74–75, 112–113).

⁷⁸ Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, pp. 41–42. Ewen's works are only available in Hebrew (see Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, p. 168). Baruch Hochman has suggested the most comprehensive model for classifying characters to date, consisting of eight continua upon which a character may be located (*Character in Literature* [Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1985], pp. 86–140). Gowler, for example, utilizes Hochman's model in his character study of the Pharisees in Luke-Acts, although he admits that this model is not entirely adequate to evaluate character in ancient narrative (*Host*, pp. 53–54, 306–317, 321). Although Conway refers to Hochman's classification, she does not utilize it herself (*Men and Women*, p. 58).

⁷⁹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, pp. 253–255 (cf. his chs. 9–10); Bar-Efrat, *Art*, pp. 86–91.

⁸⁰ Burnett, 'Characterization', p. 15 (original emphasis).

⁸¹ Others prefer the term 'focalization' (Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, p. 72; Bal, *Narratology*, p. 100; Tolmie, *Farewell*, p. 170).

⁸² Moore, *Literary Criticism*, p. 181.

⁸³ Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, p. 1 (original emphasis).

⁸⁴ Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Marguerat and Bourquin, *Bible Stories*, pp. 65–68 (quotation from p. 68).

This perspective is communicated to the reader who can therefore also not remain neutral – he or she will either accept or reject the author’s ideology.

Conclusion

Having examined aspects of character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature as well as modern fiction, we have seen that it is impossible to maintain that Hebrew character can show development while Greek character is a static, ethical type. We can no longer uphold either that, in contrast to modern fiction, ancient literature has no psychological interest in character or that character cannot move towards personality or even individuality.⁸⁶ We must obviously remain aware that characterization in ancient and modern literature is not identical but has different emphases: the ancients did not portray character individually and psychologically *as much as* the moderns do in the Western world.⁸⁷ Although there are differences in characterization in ancient and modern literature, these are differences in *emphases* rather than kind, and therefore it is 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 much more developed and ‘psychologized’.

We paid special attention to Greek literature and argued that Aristotle’s analysis of character is not necessarily representative of ancient Greek literature. Instead, we have demonstrated that from the fifth century BCE to the second century CE, from classical tragedy to comedy to biography, historiography and novel, there are significant instances where character can be complex, change, have inner life and even show personality.⁸⁸ The notion of all character in ancient Greek literature as flat, static and one-dimensional, which many scholars have derived from Aristotle’s thought, seems to be a caricature. Characterization in ancient Graeco-Roman literature was more complex and varied, and capable of approaching modern notions of character at times.⁸⁹

We have also seen that since characterization in ancient literature was primarily indirect, the reader is often left with the device of inference or gap-filling to reconstruct character. In this process, different readers may reconstruct characters differently from the same text, thereby indicating that some characters are perhaps not simple, fixed or types. Regarding character classification, a few biblical scholars and literary critics have steered away from the idea of putting characters into fixed categories towards a new direction that views character as points along a continuum. In this regard, Fred Burnett’s conclusion is worth quoting at length:

⁸⁶ See especially the essays in C.B.R. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Bauckham reaches a similar understanding (*Jesus*, p. 174). Although ‘psychological’, ‘personality’ and ‘individuality’ are modern terms, they are helpful (even necessary) for understanding ancient authors and audiences. It is inevitable, for example, when we infer a character’s traits from the deep structure of an ancient text that we use trait-names that are familiar to our modern world. Using modern terminology to analyse and describe characters in ancient literature is acceptable provided that we remember that we use categories unknown to the ancient authors and audiences. See also my references to Chatman (nn. 70, 91, 92) and Goldhill (n. 93). We must also be aware that in the reconstruction of characters we fuse two horizons and bridge a vast cultural gap. This so-called ‘new hermeneutic’, rooted in the work of philosophers M. Heidegger and H. Gadamer, is developed extensively by A.C. Thiselton (*The Two Horizons* [Exeter: Paternoster, 1980]; *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* [London: HarperCollins, 1992]).

⁸⁷ Cf. Pelling, ‘Childhood’, pp. 230–235; C.B.R. Pelling, ‘Conclusion’, in C.B.R. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 245–262 (247–251). Cf. B.J. Malina’s reminder that in ancient culture (and many non-Western cultures today), people identified themselves in terms of the social group to which they belonged, which can be called ‘group-oriented personality’ or ‘collective personality’ (*The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 3rd edn, 2001], pp. 61–62).

⁸⁸ Cf. Gowler’s conclusion (*Host*, p. 173).

⁸⁹ Cf. Lesky’s final comment that ‘Greek tragedy’s indirect influence on German, English and French literature, through the medium of the comedies, should not be underrated’ (*Tragedy*, p. 208). For further criticism of Aristotle’s understanding of character, see S. Goldhill, ‘Character and Action, Representation and Reading: Greek Tragedy and its Critics’, in C.B.R. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 100–127 (119–127); Pelling, ‘Conclusion’, pp. 257–259.

From modern views of characterization, which are interested in psychological description and change, indirect characterization in tragedy or in ancient biography and historiography appears to be simplistic. It appears to be minimal characterization, and thus it is easy to argue from a modern point of view that characters were only types and symbols. How audiences and readers inferred characters from the words, deeds, and relationships, and by what larger codes, however, still seems to be an open question. The discussions of the interest in the individual in portraiture and in tragedy, and the limited number of extant sources for both tragedies and biographical writing, should make Gospel critics reconsider the possibility from a narrative-critical viewpoint that ancient audiences and readers constructed much fuller characters than is usually thought.

[I]t does seem plausible that reading conventions that demanded that the reader infer character indirectly from words, deeds, and relationships could allow even for the typical character to fluctuate between type and individuality. If so, then it would seem wise to understand characterization, for any biblical text at least, on a continuum.⁹⁰

We are now in a position to address the issue of whether modern methods of fiction can be applied to ancient biblical narratives. We contend that we can apply both modern methods to ancient narratives and methods of fiction to non-fictional narratives as long as we take the necessary precautions. We must be aware, for instance, that by applying such methods we fuse the modern and ancient horizon, and use modern terminology to understand characters in ancient literature.

Regarding the *nature* of character, we concluded that there is reasonable evidence in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature that character could be complex, change and even show personality. Therefore, character in ancient and modern literature is probably not distinct but to be viewed on a continuum. It would then be legitimate to apply insights from modern fiction to ancient literature. In addition, if we employ Chatman's definition of character as a 'paradigm of traits' in which traits have to be inferred from the deep structure of the text, it would be natural that the trait-names we assign are derived from what we know of real people in the real world. This means we would use contemporary language to describe a character. We must remember that the names for traits are 'socially invented signs...Trait-names are not themselves traits'.⁹¹ Chatman forcefully asserts that 'characters as narrative constructs do require terms for description, and there is no point in rejecting those out of the general vocabulary of psychology, morality, and any other relevant area of human experience'.⁹² Similarly, Simon Goldhill points out that '[s]ince the description of character necessarily involves the mobilisation of (at least) implicit psychological models, it is unlikely that the criticism of Greek tragedy can expect wholly to avoid an engagement with psychological and psychoanalytic theory'.⁹³ Robert Tannehill likewise defends the use of insights from modern fiction to ancient biblical narratives:

there are qualities which all narratives share and further qualities which various narratives may share, even when some make use of historical fact, if the author has a strong, creative role. Because of the importance of the novel in modern literature, qualities of narrative are often discussed in terms of the novel. With proper caution the biblical scholar can learn from this discussion.⁹⁴

Regarding the *method* of character reconstruction, we saw that characterization in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature was primarily indirect and hence the reader has to reconstruct character by inferring its traits from the subject's words and actions. In modern literature too, the practice of inference is employed – it is unavoidable. Thus, in both ancient and modern literature, character is reconstructed from the information provided in the text. The only difference is that in

⁹⁰ Burnett, 'Characterization', pp. 13, 15. Bauckham supports Burnett's conclusion (*Jesus*, pp. 174–175). See also L.J. Lawrence, who argues that even the primarily collectivist Graeco-Roman and Jewish cultures testify to the existence of individualistic traits (*An Ethnography of the Gospel of Matthew: A Critical Assessment of the Use of the Honour and Shame Model in New Testament Studies* [WUNT, 2.165; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003], pp. 249–259).

⁹¹ G.W. Allport and H.S. Odbert, *Trait-Names: A Psycholexical Study, Psychological Monographs* 47 (Princeton, 1936), p. 17, cited in Chatman, *Story*, p. 124.

⁹² Chatman, *Story*, p. 138.

⁹³ S. Goldhill, 'Modern critical approaches to Greek tragedy', in P.E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), pp. 324–347 (343).

⁹⁴ R.C. Tannehill, 'The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role', *Journal of Religion* 57 (1977), pp. 386–405 (387).

ancient literature there is *less* direct characterization and one has to resort *more* to the device of inference or gap-filling than in modern fiction. Therefore, characterization should be seen as a continuum in which a narrator's statement about a character provides more certainty than a character's action which needs a higher degree of inference.

Having examined aspects of character in ancient and modern literature, we must now turn to the Fourth Gospel and consider which aspects apply (and how) in order to develop a coherent and comprehensive theory of character for the Fourth Gospel. This is legitimate since we have concluded that we can apply insights from modern fiction to non-fictional ancient narratives such as the Fourth Gospel because the nature of character and the method of reconstructing character are more alike than different in ancient and modern literature.

II. Character in the Fourth Gospel

Regarding genre, the Fourth Gospel most closely resembles a Graeco-Roman biography in form and content, but may contain elements of Hebrew biblical narrative and Greek drama.⁹⁵ Burrige argues that, as in Graeco-Roman βίοι, characterization in the Fourth Gospel is achieved primarily through the indirect means of narrating the subject's words and deeds, and while characterization is often stereotypical, a more 'real' picture emerges through the narrative itself.⁹⁶ Although Burrige only examines the character Jesus, a more 'real' character comes through in the Fourth Evangelist's portraits of many others such as Peter, Pilate, Judas, the Samaritan woman and the man born blind.

Johannine scholars often seem Aristotelian when it comes to their understanding of character in the Fourth Gospel, submitting character to plot and arguing (or sometimes simply assuming) that the characters in the Fourth Gospel are 'flat', unchanging or one-dimensional (see n. 8). However, the Aristotelian view of character as subordinate or secondary to action and plot is difficult to uphold for the Fourth Gospel where the characters' speeches significantly outweigh the events. Many Johannine scholars also view the characters mainly in terms of their representative response to Jesus, effectively reducing them to types. We shall demonstrate, however, that a typical or representative belief-response does not necessarily reduce the character to a type, and that while some Johannine characters are indeed types, many others are complex, developing and round.⁹⁷

The Study of Character in Text and Context

The Fourth Gospel is non-fiction, and hence the dramatis personae in the Johannine story are also composites of real historical people. This almost demands that we also look outside the Fourth Gospel at other sources that can assist us in reconstructing the Johannine characters. Frank Kermode has said that in constructing character we (should) supplement the text 'by inferring from the repertoire of indices characteristics not immediately signalled in the text, but familiar from other texts and from life'.⁹⁸ Marianne Mey Thompson argues similarly: "Actual readers" of the gospels

⁹⁵ Burrige has argued most forcefully for viewing the Gospels as βίοι (see n. 14). Stibbe agrees that the form of the Fourth Gospel is that of the βίος, but he suggests a more comprehensive account of its genre, including elements of Hebrew narrative and Greek comedy, romance, satire and tragedy (*John as Storyteller*, ch. 2; *John's Gospel*, ch. 3 [but see Burrige's reply (*Gospels*, p. 280)]). Brant attempts to understand the Fourth Gospel against the backdrop of classical Greek tragedy (*Dialogue, passim*; cf. Koester, *Symbolism*, pp. 36–38).

⁹⁶ Burrige, *Gospels*, pp. 222–223, 227.

⁹⁷ C.M. Conway also observes that the Johannine characters have often been understood as flat because they have typically been viewed as representatives of belief or unbelief. In her perceptive article, she criticizes this 'flattening' of characters, arguing that the Johannine characters contain varying degrees of ambiguity and do more to complicate the clear choice between belief and unbelief than to illustrate it ('Speaking through Ambiguity: Minor Characters in the Fourth Gospel', *Biblical Interpretation* 10 [2002], pp. 324–341).

⁹⁸ F. Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 78.

may well have access to the characters in the narrative in other ways, whether through oral or written tradition, and these other “narratives” surely influence the way they read.⁹⁹

In a perceptive article, Petri Merenlahti and Raimo Hakola compare fictional and non-fictional narratives. In case of the latter, (i) the author vouches for the veracity of the narrative and assumes that the reader believes it; and (ii) the narrator represents the author and his point of view and therefore there is continuity between ‘reality’ and the narrative world.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the Fourth Evangelist explicitly states that his story is true and therefore can be believed (19:35; 21:24),¹⁰¹ and since there is no real distinction between the author and narrator in the Fourth Gospel, the narrator reliably represents the author’s voice and view.¹⁰² Merenlahti and Hakola then state why non-fictional narratives must be seen *in context*:

Because a non-fictional narrative claims to refer to events and circumstances of the ‘real’ world, it is natural that the readers try to fill any gaps the narrative may have, making use of all available information about the events and circumstances in concern. What readers of a non-fictional narrative think of a character depends not only on what the narrator reveals but also on what else the readers may know about the person who is portrayed as a character in the narrative...The natural way to read a Gospel would be to make connections between character groups of the story and the ‘real’ groups which those characters intend to portray...An ‘intrinsic’, text-centered approach does not seem to match properly the nature of the Gospels as non-fictional narratives.¹⁰³

These arguments readily apply to the Fourth Gospel. One cannot simply assume, for example, that ‘the Jews’ in the Fourth Gospel is a monolithic group – either in composition or in its response to Jesus. One must also study the ‘referent’ of ‘the Jews’, which relates to the group’s identity as real people in the time of Jesus or the Evangelist.¹⁰⁴ As for the character of Pilate, it is imperative that we examine the works of Josephus and Philo since many scholars contend that these sources portray Pilate differently than the Fourth Gospel.

This is an important new direction in narrative criticism. Too often, narrative critics restrict themselves to the text of the gospel and the narrative world it evokes, thereby effectively reading the gospel as a fictional narrative that has no contact with reality.¹⁰⁵ Instead, we need a form of

⁹⁹ Thompson, ‘Voice’, p. 181.

¹⁰⁰ P. Merenlahti and R. Hakola, ‘Reconceiving Narrative Criticism’, in D. Rhoads and K. Syreeni (eds.), *Characterization in the Gospels: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism* (JSNTS, 184; Sheffield: SAP, 1999), pp. 13–48 (35–38).

¹⁰¹ Merenlahti and Hakola explain that though not everything in non-fictional narratives is necessarily historical, this does not make them fictional narratives since they do assert to describe the real world; what counts is that the reader does not doubt the author’s explicit or implicit truth claims (‘Narrative Criticism’, p. 38). Sternberg argues similarly for the Hebrew bible as historiography: ‘history-writing is not a record of fact – of what “really happened” – but a discourse that claims to be a record of fact. Nor is fiction-writing a tissue of free inventions but a discourse that claims freedom of invention. The antithesis lies not in the presence or absence of truth value but of the commitment to truth value’ (*Poetics*, pp. 24–35 [quotation taken from p. 25]). A.T. Lincoln makes a similar case for the Fourth Gospel when he argues that it belongs to the genre of the Graeco-Roman βίος, where the purpose is to draw out the significance and interpretation of historical events. Hence the Fourth Gospel need not necessarily be historically accurate in all its detail; it may be a mixture of historical accuracy and fictional imagination in its witness to the truth. (*Truth on Trial: The Lawsuit Motif in the Fourth Gospel* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000], pp. 369–397. Thus, the historicity of the characters in the Fourth Gospel does not exclude the possibility that the author used a legitimate degree of artistic freedom to portray his characters. Besides, the Gospel authors were theologians; they wrote from a post-Easter perspective and interpreted the pre-Easter events with a specific (theological) agenda in mind. The primary concern of the Fourth Evangelist is to assure his readers that his story of Jesus is a true and reliable witness (cf. 19:35; 21:24).

¹⁰² Cf. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 42–43. J.L. Staley, however, argues that the Johannine narrator is not consistently reliable, resulting in the entrapment or victimization of the reader (*The Print’s First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* [SBLDS, 82; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988]), but his case has not won much support.

¹⁰³ Merenlahti and Hakola, ‘Narrative Criticism’, pp. 40–43.

¹⁰⁴ I have undertaken this study elsewhere and argued that the referent of the term ‘the Jews’ cannot be resolved entirely narratologically (C. Bennema, ‘The Identity and Composition of οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Gospel of John’, *Tyndale Bulletin* [forthcoming 2009]).

¹⁰⁵ 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

historical narrative criticism, taking a text-centred approach but examining aspects of the world outside or ‘behind’ the text if the text invites us to do so.¹⁰⁶ In other words, we should reconstruct the Johannine characters from the information that the text of the Fourth Gospel provides and supplement it with relevant information from other sources.¹⁰⁷

Classification of Character in the Fourth Gospel

Applying Harvey’s classification to the Fourth Gospel does not yield much since almost all the characters who interact with the protagonist Jesus are cards/ficelles, which does not improve our understanding of the characters themselves. Applying Chatman’s definition of character as a paradigm of traits, we could use Forster’s classification of flat and round character but it would be too reductionistic and many Johannine characters would not easily fit into his categories.¹⁰⁸ The new direction in character classification is to understand character not in fixed categories but on a continuum. In that respect, Ewen’s classification (see our section ‘Character in Modern Fiction’) is a sophisticated, non-reductionist classification of character and has potential to be applied to the Fourth Gospel albeit with a few clarifications and modifications.

The continuum of *complexity* would range from characters with a single trait to those who have one dominant trait and some secondary traits to those who have multiple traits. Examples of characters with a single trait are Andrew (he finds people and brings them to Jesus) and Nathanael (sceptic but responsive). Others have a dominant trait combined with secondary traits. For example, the primary trait of John (the Baptist) is to be a witness to Jesus, but he also displays the traits of a baptizer, herald, teacher, best man and a light.¹⁰⁹ Judas’s dominant trait is to betray Jesus, but he also has traits such as lack of care, dishonesty and disloyalty. Other characters who have primary and secondary traits are Nicodemus (mainly ambiguous but he also has traits of interest in Jesus and courage), the Samaritan woman and the man born blind (both are perceptive in their struggles to understand Jesus but also show traits of witnessing, courage and open-mindedness). Complex, multi-trait characters include Pilate and Peter.

The continuum of *development* ranges from characters with no development (they are static, unchanging) to those who display some development to those who change dramatically. Two comments. First, the development can sometimes be traced in the text but at other times it is implied.¹¹⁰ In the Fourth Gospel, Judas is an example of one who displays both implicit and explicit development. When the narrator mentions that Judas is a thief (12:6), we may infer that he did not join Jesus’ fellowship as a thief but became one along the way – an implicit development. Then, the narrator traces Judas’s development explicitly: from being influenced by the devil (13:2) to being

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], pp. 32, 39).

¹⁰⁶ Almost twenty years after *Narrative Fiction* was first published, Rimmon-Kenan points to new forms of narratology, including a cultural and historical narratology that is context-orientated, and historical and diachronous in orientation (*Fiction*, pp. 140–142).

¹⁰⁷ Cf. J.A. Darr who proposes an extratextual approach (*Herod the Fox: Audience Criticism and Lukan Characterization* [JSNTS, 163; Sheffield: SAP, 1998], pp. 89–91. Stibbe also asserts that ‘characters in the gospels need to be analysed with reference to history, and not according to the laws of fiction’ (*John as Storyteller*, p. 24). M.C. de Boer provides the best defence for a combined historical and narratological approach to the Fourth Gospel (‘Narrative Criticism, Historical Criticism, and the Gospel of John’, *JSNT* 47 [1992], pp. 35–48). We will not go as far as R.E. Brown, who identifies seven historical groups of people behind the representative figures within the Gospel (*The Community of the Beloved Disciple* [New York: Paulist Press, 1979], pp. 59–91).

¹⁰⁸ Lehtipuu contends that Forster’s distinction of round and flat characters is based on psychological criteria, which cannot be applied to the Gospels as they are apsychoological, plot-centred narratives (over against psychological, character-centred narratives) (‘Characterization’, p. 79). However, the Fourth Gospel seems a character-centred narrative – the characters’ speeches greatly outweigh the events – and we cannot simply subordinate the characters to the gospel’s plot. Besides, it is virtually impossible to reconstruct the Gospels’ characters without referring to modern psychological categories (cf. n. 86 and the comments of Chatman and Goldhill in nn. 91–93).

¹⁰⁹ In fact, John’s secondary traits clarify and define his primary trait of being a witness to Jesus.

¹¹⁰ Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, p. 42.

indwelt by the devil (13:27) to finally leaving the fellowship of Jesus and entering into the darkness (13:30) – in short, the catastrophic development from a disciple of Jesus to a disciple of Satan.¹¹¹

Second, development occurs when a new trait replaces another or does not fit neatly into the existing set of traits, implying that the character has changed.¹¹² This coheres with Forster's criterion of a character's ability to surprise the reader. We can therefore speak of development when tension becomes apparent within a character's set of traits. Development is not simply the addition of another trait that the reader infers further forward on the text continuum or a character's progress in his or her understanding of Jesus. For example, the revelation in 6:70–71 that Judas will betray Jesus is meant to shock the reader, and although there is no explanation the implication is that Judas has developed (or will develop) from one of Jesus' intimate friends to a betrayer. When Jesus repeats the prediction in 13:21, the disciples are shocked, again indicating the development that Judas has undergone. Even after Jesus provides a clue about the betrayer's identity, the disciples are too stunned to comprehend it (13:26–29). The reader is also expected to be surprised by these changes in Judas and will notice the replacement of traits. Since 12:6 mentions that Judas was the treasurer of the group (a position of trust) but also a thief, traits of honesty and reliability are being replaced by dishonesty and unreliability. Then, with the switch of allegiance from Jesus to Satan, traits of intimacy and following Jesus disappear, and alienation and defection emerge.

Other characters are also capable of surprising the reader and hence show development. The Samaritan woman is unafraid of violating social norms by entering into a dialogue with a Jewish man. She also proves to be a sharp, theological thinker, able to grasp enough of Jesus' revelation to testify to her kinsfolk (in sharp contrast to Nicodemus). The man blind from birth, a beggar and presumably uneducated, not only progresses remarkably in his understanding of Jesus but he does so *as* he boldly defends Jesus while facing persecution from the religious authorities. Disadvantaged and marginalized in relation to others, the Samaritan woman and the blind man surprise us with their cognitive abilities and the way they acquire an authentic understanding of Jesus. Nicodemus's initial display of some true knowledge of Jesus (3:2) creates the expectation that he will progress in his understanding of Jesus in the dialogue that follows but the opposite occurs. Jesus expresses his dismay that this leading theologian cannot grasp the spiritual realities he is speaking of (3:10). Then, Peter's denial and cowardice in 18:15–27 shockingly contradicts his earlier christological confession in 6:68–69 and impulsive bravado in 13:37 and 18:10. The reader may also be surprised that the cruel Pilate towards the end of the trial suddenly tries fervently to release Jesus (19:12).

Ewen's third continuum of *penetration into the inner life* is more difficult to apply to the Fourth Gospel since it appears that we are not privy to the inner thoughts, emotions or motivations of the characters – only Jesus' inner life is well portrayed.¹¹³ Scholes and Kellogg, for example, comment that '[t]he inward life is assumed but not presented in primitive literature, whether Hebraic or Hellenic'.¹¹⁴ Regarding the Johannine characters, Tolmie concludes that no inner life is revealed.¹¹⁵ This is however a mistaken notion; the Fourth Gospel portrays the inner life of many characters. Evidence of inner life is one aspect that moves a character towards roundness or individuality.

The inner life of characters gives the reader insight into their thoughts, emotions and motivations, and is usually conveyed by the narrator and sometimes by other characters.¹¹⁶ In the Fourth Gospel, the narrator communicates aspects of the inner life of various characters:

¹¹¹ Contra Resseguie, who describes Judas as 'a flat character who does not develop' (*Narrative Criticism*, p. 159).

¹¹² Cf. Rimmon-Kenan, *Fiction*, p. 39.

¹¹³ Jesus is zealous about his Father's affairs (2:17); has insight into people's lives (2:24–25); can be tired (4:6), agitated (11:33, 38), sad (11:35), troubled (12:27; 13:21) and joyful (11:15, 15:11; 17:13); he loves people (11:5; 13:1, 23, 34); he knows his betrayer (6:70; 13:11, 21). Cf. S. Voorwinde, *Jesus' Emotions in the Fourth Gospel: Human or Divine?* (LNTS, 284; London: T&T Clark, 2005).

¹¹⁴ Scholes and Kellogg, *Nature*, p. 166.

¹¹⁵ Tolmie, *Farewell*, p. 142. Except for regarding the inner life of Jesus and the disciples as 'a little' (without providing examples), he considers the inner life of all other characters as 'none'.

¹¹⁶ Berlin, *Poetics*, p. 38. Cf. Bar-Efrat, who provides numerous examples of the inner life of characters in the Hebrew bible (*Art*, pp. 58–64).

- the disciples remember certain things (2:17, 22; 12:16), are amazed (4:27), afraid (6:19; 20:19), make assumptions (11:13; 13:29), are at a loss (13:22), do not understand (12:16; 13:28; 21:4), and lack courage (21:12);
- the royal official believes and knows (4:50, 53);
- the invalid at the pool lacks knowledge (5:13);
- the crowd follows Jesus and draws conclusions because it sees his signs (6:2, 14), it exhibits inner thought processes and logic (6:22–24), and can be afraid (7:13);
- the religious authorities do not understand (8:27; 10:6), assume (11:31), are afraid (12:42), love human praise (12:43), and want to kill Jesus (5:18; 11:53);
- Judas is careless and dishonest (12:6), influenced in his mind by the devil (13:2), set to betray Jesus (6:71; 12:4), and knows where Jesus often goes (18:3);
- the man born blind has some knowledge of God (9:31);
- Pilate is afraid (19:8) and wants to release Jesus (19:12);
- Joseph of Arimathea is afraid (19:38);
- the Beloved Disciple sees and believes (20:8);
- Mary Magdalene lacks knowledge and makes an assumption (20:14–15).

Besides the narrator, *Jesus* also reveals the inner thoughts and motivations of people. Regarding the Jewish authorities, he reveals that they make assumptions, neither love nor know God, do not accept him but seek people's praise, have no understanding, are unbelieving, sinners, enslaved, murderous and belonging to the devil rather than to God (5:39–47; 8:31–55). Jesus also exposes the false motives and unbelief of the crowd (6:26, 36); the inner thoughts of those disciples who could no longer accept his teaching (6:61, 64); the imminent betrayal of Judas (6:70; 13:21); the bravado of Peter (13:37–38); and the sorrow of his inner circle of disciples (14:1; 16:6). Jesus' insight into people's inner lives is unique but should not surprise us since he is the revealer *par excellence*, the one who knows all people and what is in them (2:24–25; cf. 6:64; 13:11; 16:30; 21:17).

Occasionally characters themselves reveal their inner life. For example, John (the Baptist) admits his initial ignorance of the Messiah's identity and how he acquired that knowledge (1:33); Nathanael's rhetorical question betrays his scepticism (1:46); Nicodemus claims knowledge of Jesus (3:2); the Jewish leaders also claim to know Jesus (9:24, 29) and sometimes their style of speaking is comparable to a character's self-talk – an 'inner monologue' (7:35–36; 9:16; cf. the crowd in 7:12, 40–43). On the odd occasion, even the structure of a passage reveals a character's inner life. For example, Jesus' trial before Pilate in 18:28–19:16a contains seven rounds and with each round Pilate alternates between coming out of and going into his palace, reflecting his inner conflict – Pilate goes back and forth in his mind.¹¹⁷ The Fourth Evangelist thus employs a variety of means to convey aspects of the inner life of his characters.¹¹⁸

After plotting the characters along these three continua of complexity, development and penetration into the inner life, we can create a continuum of *degree of characterization*. We can plot each character on this resulting 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. Examples of agents include the master of ceremonies in 2:9–10 and the servants of the royal official in 4:51–52 – they simply fulfil a function in the plot and do not produce a response to Jesus. Examples of types – characters who have a single trait and show no development – are Andrew and Nathanael. Characters with personality – displaying development and a measure of complexity but not fully round – are Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman and the man born blind. Characters such as Peter,

¹¹⁷ Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, pp. 105–106; C. Bennema, *Excavating John's Gospel: A Commentary for Today* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005 [repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008]), pp. 197, 204.

¹¹⁸ Contra Culpepper, who only mentions what the *narrator* conveys about the characters' inner life. Besides, he regards the narrator's inside views as 'brief' and 'shallow', concluding that the Fourth Evangelist shows 'no interest in exploring the more complex psychological motivations of his characters' (*Anatomy*, pp. 22–26 [quotation from p. 26]). However, although many inside views are indeed brief, they can convey profound understanding of a character. The brief insights about Judas's dishonesty and that he is influenced by the devil can hardly be called shallow. We can obviously not expect the same amount and kind of inner life as in a modern novel.

Judas and Pilate are more developed, complex and can be called individuals or persons. We can tabulate the results as follows:

CHARACTER	COMPLEXITY	DEVELOPMENT	INNER LIFE	DEGREE OF CHARACTERIZATION
Master of ceremonies	0	0	0	agent
Servants of the royal official	0	0	0	agent
John (the Baptist)	+	0	-	type
Andrew	-	0/-	0	type
Nathanael	-	0	-	type
Nicodemus	+ / ++	- / +	-	personality
Samaritan woman	+	+	0	personality
Blind man	+	+	-	personality
Judas	+ / ++	++	++	towards individual
Pilate	++	+	+	towards individual
Peter	++	+	0 / -	towards individual

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

Our proposed classification of character can obviously be expanded with more continua, but the basic structure of our model remains, namely a continuum of degree of characterization which is informed by a number of sub-continua.

Alan Culpepper and François Tolmie are the only scholars to have classified the Johannine characters and therefore we will assess their work. Culpepper's analysis of character in the Fourth Gospel, though twenty-five years old is undoubtedly the most detailed and significant till date. He uses Forster's classification in part, stating that the Johannine characters are types and do not have much of a personality: for example, Thomas doubts, Peter is impulsive, the Beloved Disciple is perceptive.¹¹⁹ He also employs Harvey's classification, seeing Jesus as the protagonist and most other characters as *ficelles* – 'typical characters easily recognizable by the readers' and fulfilling specific plot functions.¹²⁰ Although Culpepper describes almost all the relevant Johannine characters, he does not classify them (they are all *ficelles* or types) but only their belief-responses. In doing so, he effectively reduces the characters to their respective responses. Even if the Johannine characters are plot-functionaries who represent various responses to Jesus we cannot simply reduce them to their respective responses, converting them into types without personality. I suggest that the Fourth Evangelist is subtler than that. It is not so much the characters that are types as it is their *responses* to Jesus. Many characters gain 'roundness' in the Johannine narrative and move towards personality or even individuality on the degree of characterization continuum, but their responses are typical. For example, Nicodemus comes across as a somewhat round character – sympathetic towards Jesus but slow when it comes to spiritual matters, willing to be associated with Jesus and ready to face scorn and possible retaliation from his colleagues but not taking a clear stand. But his dominant response of ambiguity (it remains unclear whether he accepts Jesus) is typical. It is thus imperative that we classify *both* the characters *and* their responses towards Jesus.

In his narratological analysis of John 13–17, Tolmie also examines its characters. The weakness of his study, however, is the way he employs the classifications of Forster, Harvey, Greimas and Ewen.¹²¹ He uses Greimas's actantial model best, but we have already pointed out that this is *not* the ideal model to understand characters since it concentrates on plot, thereby subordinating characters to it and reducing them to mere actants. The characters in the Fourth Gospel have a much more important role.¹²² As for the other classifications, Tolmie uses them inadequately. He regards

¹¹⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 102, 145.

¹²⁰ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, p. 104. Elsewhere he uses the term 'minor' characters as analogous to types or *ficelles* (*Anatomy*, pp. 102, 132, 145).

¹²¹ Tolmie, *Farewell*, pp. 120–124; 141–143.

¹²² It is therefore surprising that Tolmie concludes that Greimas's model is one of the two most suitable models for classifying Johannine characters (*Farewell*, p. 144). Other scholars who have used an actantial analysis of the plot of the Fourth Gospel are: M.W.G. Stibbe, "'Return to Sender': A Structuralist Approach to John's Gospel", *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993), pp. 189–206; Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, pp. 38–53; Lincoln, *Truth*, pp. 162–166; C. Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel*

Forster's classification as inadequate because all the characters in John 13–17 would have to be classified as flat since none of them is able to surprise the reader. However, Tolmie does not clarify why it would be inadequate to classify all the characters as flat if indeed they cannot surprise the reader. More importantly, I contend that it is methodologically incorrect to examine only a section of the narrative (John 13–17 in Tolmie's case) to reconstruct characters. If we consider the entire Johannine narrative, some of the characters that Tolmie analyses are indeed able to surprise the reader (e.g., Judas Iscariot and Peter). Using Harvey's classification, Tolmie simply observes that Jesus is to be classified as the protagonist and all the other characters as *ficelles*, but he does not elaborate. Indeed, we had pointed out that Harvey's classification of characters according to their importance or presence in the narrative does not provide much understanding of the characters themselves. Applying Ewen's classification, Tolmie evaluates all characters (except God, Jesus and the Spirit-Paraclete) as not complex or having a single trait, showing no development and revealing no inner life. It is ironic that using Ewen's non-reductionist classification, Tolmie still arrives at a reductionist understanding of the Johannine characters. Again, if Tolmie had analysed all characters along the entire text continuum of the Fourth Gospel, his results might have been different.

In sum, the task of organizing all the Johannine characters into an adequate classification has not yet been successfully undertaken. Besides the characters themselves, their responses also need classification but we must first look at the Fourth Evangelist's perspective or point of view.

Evaluative Point of View in the Fourth Gospel

As we analyse the Johannine characters, we must be conscious of the Fourth Evangelist's evaluative point of view, which is his appraisive commentary on the story and hence operates at the level of narrative. 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 should embrace it.¹²³ The Fourth Evangelist has written his gospel with a specific purpose in mind: 'But these [Jesus' miraculous signs] are written so that you may (come to or continue to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have (eternal) life in his name' (20:31).¹²⁴ The author's evaluative point of view is thus directly related to the purpose and worldview of the Fourth Gospel. Stephen Moore succinctly captures the dynamic between purpose and point of view in the Fourth Gospel:

Johannine characterization...is entirely christocentric. Jesus is a static character in the Fourth Gospel...The functions of the other characters are to draw out various aspects of Jesus' character by supplying personalities and situations with which he can interact, and to illustrate a spectrum of alternative responses to him...Such characterizations are strategically oriented toward the reader, pushing him or her also toward a decisive response to Jesus.¹²⁵

Similarly, Mark Stibbe asserts that

The narrator works obviously...to coax the reader round to the point of view or ideological stance which he embraces. That point of view is the enlightened post-resurrectional understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God, and it is this understanding which undergirds the narrator's rhetorical strategy expressed in John 20.31.¹²⁶

The Fourth Evangelist tries to persuade his readers by communicating and recommending his values and norms to the reader, particularly in the way he portrays his characters and evaluates them. Through his portrayal of various characters, the Fourth Evangelist encourages the reader to identify with those characters or responses that are worthy of imitation and to dissociate from

(WUNT, 2.148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002 [repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007]), pp. 106–107 (cf. my critique of Stibbe and Tolmie there).

¹²³ Cf. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 32–33, 89, 97–98.

¹²⁴ For a discussion of the textual variant πιστεύ[σ]ητε, see Bennema, *Power*, pp. 107–109, or any major commentary.

¹²⁵ Moore, *Literary Criticism*, p. 49.

¹²⁶ Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, p. 28.

characters or responses that are not.¹²⁷ The reader therefore, must evaluate the characters and judge to what extent a character's response to Jesus is adequate. As the reader identifies with the characters, he or she must also evaluate his or her own belief-response. The author reveals his point of view in the narrative rhetoric and demands from the reader a self-evaluation regarding his or her stance towards Jesus, recommending one that corresponds to the purpose of his gospel stated in 20:30–31.¹²⁸ As Culpepper aptly concludes:

The affective power of the plot pushes the reader toward a response to Jesus. The characters, who illustrate a variety of responses, allow the reader to examine the alternatives. The shape of the narrative and the voice of the narrator lead the reader to identify or interact variously with each character...readers may place themselves in the role of each character successively while searching for the response they will choose. Through the construction of the gospel as narrative, therefore, the evangelist leads the reader toward his own ideological point of view, the response he deems preferable.¹²⁹

Some scholars who have studied the Johannine characters have not discussed the ideological or evaluative point of view of the Fourth Gospel, and, as a result, the characters' responses towards Jesus have not been evaluated.¹³⁰ A few people connect the Johannine characters with the gospel's worldview and evaluative point of view. Alan Culpepper argues that the Johannine characters are 'typical characters easily recognizable by the readers' and that '[t]he characters are...particular sorts 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.'¹³¹ He then produces an extensive taxonomy of belief-responses in relation to the Fourth Evangelist's ideological point of view.¹³² Although Culpepper is the only one who produces a continuum of belief-responses (and a commendable one), he does not classify the characters themselves but only their responses, thereby reducing the characters to their typical responses and hence to types. His analysis is therefore too reductionistic and raises questions: Does Nicodemus make a clear choice? Are Peter and Pilate types, easily recognizable? Is Thomas simply the doubter?

James Resseguie has produced an entire monograph on point of view in the Fourth Gospel, where he explores eleven characters (besides Jesus) to show that they 'represent distinct points of view that elaborate, reinforce, or in some way highlight ideological perspectives of the gospel'.¹³³ He concludes, for instance, that the lame man and the blind man represent the marginalized in society, and that Nicodemus, the royal official, the world and the Jewish authorities represent the dominant culture.¹³⁴ Although Resseguie mentions the characters' faith-stance, he evaluates the

¹²⁷ According to Beck, anonymity facilitates readers' identification with, and imitation of, characters in the Fourth Gospel. Beck concludes that the unnamed characters most closely model the paradigm of discipleship, of appropriate response to Jesus, whereas named characters, even with a degree of positive approval, are inappropriate models for reader identification and imitation (*Discipleship Paradigm*, pp. 137–142; cf. his earlier essay, 'The Narrative Function of Anonymity in Fourth Gospel Characterization', *Semeia* 63 [1993], pp. 143–158). Beck, however, overstates his case, thereby misreading some characters. For example, contra Beck, the invalid at the pool is not a model to be emulated since he does not seem to give heed to Jesus' warning but instead reports Jesus to the Jewish authorities, resulting in Jesus' being persecuted (5:14–16). On the other hand, why do the responses of Nathanael, Martha and Thomas not constitute an appropriate belief-response (so Beck, *Discipleship Paradigm*, pp. 139–140) – especially when their confessions closely resemble the ideal Johannine confession in 20:31? Moreover, do John (the Baptist) as the witness *par excellence* 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? Beck is incorrect in his character analysis and too categorical in concluding that *only* the anonymous characters represent a paradigm of discipleship.

¹²⁸ For this paragraph I depended on Tannehill, 'Disciples', pp. 387–396. Conway also notes that the Fourth Gospel 'pushes the reader toward a decision' ('Ambiguity', p. 324). Gill made similar observations about evaluative point of view in Plutarch's work (see n. 56).

¹²⁹ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, p. 148.

¹³⁰ See, for example, the studies of Kraft, Collins, Tolmie and Koester (see n. 8 for details).

¹³¹ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, p. 104.

¹³² Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 145–148.

¹³³ Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, ch. 3 (quotation from p. 109).

¹³⁴ Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, p. 167.

characters primarily from a material or sociological perspective rather than from the Fourth Evangelist's overall purpose and worldview, which are clearly soteriological.

Colleen Conway argues 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.¹³⁵ Conway's article is stimulating and has much to commend, but her conclusion that the Fourth Evangelist cannot fit his characters' varied responses into his dualistic worldview is surprising. In the next section we will suggest how this can be solved.

Somewhat similar to Conway, Jo-Ann Brant 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'.¹³⁶ Drawing parallels with ancient Greek tragedy, she 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.¹³⁷ '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?"'¹³⁸ If Brant had considered the Fourth Evangelist'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 toward Jesus. The narrative and its inbuilt perspective *demands* that the reader reflects on and assesses a character. Besides, the Fourth Evangelist's aim is not simply that the reader judges characters for their own sake but that in this process of evaluation the reader will judge his or her *own* response towards Jesus. Brant wrongly assumes that the Fourth Evangelist's purpose for writing his gospel is only for believers to deepen an existing faith; the gospel is also meant to persuade non-believers to come to believe in Jesus and in doing so to participate in the eternal life available in him.¹³⁹

The Fourth Evangelist's evaluative point of view thus corresponds to the soteriological purpose for which he has written his narrative (to elicit faith in Jesus as the Messiah in order to have eternal life) and to his dualistic worldview in which there is scope for only two responses towards Jesus (acceptance or rejection). The Fourth Evangelist's evaluative point of view therefore contains 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 the Fourth Evangelist has adopted? This brings us to the last aspect of our theory.

Classification of Characters' Responses in the Fourth Gospel

Besides examining and classifying the Johannine characters, we must also analyse and classify their *responses* towards Jesus. Contra many scholars who perceive Johannine characters as types, we argue that it is their responses to Jesus that are typical or representative. We contend that the Fourth Evangelist has presented an array of responses to Jesus that are applicable in any time and context – they are human responses.¹⁴⁰ Burnett points out that a biblical character may display individuality but need not be idiosyncratic: 'A biblical character may leave the reader with the impression of individuality because of that character's situation or response to events, yet he or she can still be

¹³⁵ Conway, 'Ambiguity', pp. 328–341.

¹³⁶ Brant, *Dialogue*, p. 225. Earlier, Brant admits that '[p]erhaps it is simply a reflection of my position as a modern reader conscious of the historical contingency of my faith that I seek to find some sort of awareness that the disbelief of the crowd or the Jews is not to be treated as a corporate character flaw but as a twist of plot or an accident of history' (*Dialogue*, p. 225). It is however dangerous to be guided by one's own views rather than by those of the Fourth Evangelist.

¹³⁷ Brant, *Dialogue*, pp. 225–226, 259–260.

¹³⁸ Brant, *Dialogue*, p. 231.

¹³⁹ Cf. Bennema, *Power*, pp. 107–109.

¹⁴⁰ Even the highly contextual response of Joseph of Arimathea as secret belief instigated by 'the fear of the Jews' (19:38) remains relevant today since many people do not dare to confess their allegiance to Jesus openly lest they might be ostracized or persecuted. Similarly, Nicodemus' ambiguity of being sympathetic towards Jesus without making a decisive commitment is a common attitude today.

representative of a generic ethos.’¹⁴¹ In other words, characters like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Peter or Pilate may acquire personality or even individuality on the continuum of degree of characterization, while their responses to Jesus remain representative or typical. In short, *a character’s typical belief-response need not reduce the character to a type.*¹⁴²

The variety of responses to Jesus is part of a larger soteriological framework that is informed by the purpose and worldview of the Fourth Gospel. The Fourth Evangelist’s dualistic worldview only allows for the options of acceptance or rejection of Jesus, and hence all responses are either adequate or inadequate. We qualify 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 a personal allegiance to Jesus.¹⁴³ 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 the Fourth Evangelist’s evaluation of this response, which obviously relates to his evaluative point of view.

We thus contend that the responses of the characters to Jesus should be analysed, classified and evaluated in relation to the soteriological purpose and dualistic worldview of the Fourth Gospel. But how will such diverse responses fit into the binary categories of belief and unbelief, adequate and inadequate? We saw in the previous section that Conway, for instance, does not believe that the Fourth Gospel’s dualism can contain such a range of responses, while Brant contends that we should not even try to fit this spectrum of responses into it. I suggest that the characters’ responses can (and should) fit into the dualistic worldview of the Fourth Gospel as follows: the two responses of acceptance and rejection are the ultimate responses from a *divine* perspective while the responses of the Johannine characters correspond to the *human* perspective, reflecting the range of complex responses that people make in real life. We would then do justice to both realities. On the one hand, the divine reality is that the world and its people are enveloped in darkness and do not know God – they are ‘from below’. As the solution to people’s cognitive darkness or lack of divine knowledge, Jesus came to the world to reveal God and to bring people into an everlasting, life-giving relationship with himself and God. When they encounter Jesus, people can either reject or accept him, and consequently remain ‘from below’ or become ‘from above’ through a spiritual birth. On the other hand, the human reality is that one can react to Jesus in a number of ways – instantly or gradually, positively or negatively, consistently or haphazardly, ambiguously or evidently. Faced with this reality we must attempt to evaluate what the Fourth Evangelist thinks would qualify for the new birth that brings people into the realm of God – what kind of responses would bring and keep people into a life-giving relationship with Jesus.¹⁴⁴

Let us examine some responses, bearing in mind that a character’s response to Jesus can be explicit or implicit, verbal or non-verbal. Examples of explicit belief-responses are Nathanael’s ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the king of Israel’ (1:49; ‘king of Israel’ is a messianic title) and Martha’s ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God’ (11:27). We evaluate these responses as adequate since they closely parallel the ideal Johannine confession that ‘Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God’ (20:31). Regarding Nicodemus, contra many scholars who force a decision upon him, we contend that Nicodemus remains sympathetic but non-committal towards Jesus throughout the narrative. His dominant trait is that of ambiguity. But we cannot stop there, his response must be evaluated, and when we consider the Fourth Evangelist’s evaluative point of view, we have to conclude that remaining ambiguous as a belief-response is inadequate.

The Samaritan woman’s response to Jesus is implicit rather than explicit, and we evaluate it as adequate: (i) she leaves the water jar behind (4:28), possibly symbolizing that her thirst has been quenched; (ii) she invites her fellow-villagers to ‘come and see’ this man, Jesus, whom she

¹⁴¹ Burnett, ‘Characterization’, p. 19 n. 7.

¹⁴² Cf. Koester’s assertion that the characters’ ‘representative roles do not negate their individuality but actually develop their most distinctive traits’ (*Symbolism*, p. 35).

¹⁴³ Bennema, *Power*, pp. 124–133; C. Bennema, ‘Christ, the Spirit and the Knowledge of God – A Study in Johannine Epistemology’, in M. Healy and R. Parry (eds.), *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), pp. 107–133 (119–120).

¹⁴⁴ See further Bennema, ‘Christ’, pp. 110–122.

tentatively believes is the Messiah (4:28–29; cf. 1:46);¹⁴⁵ (iii) many Samaritans believe in Jesus on the basis of the woman’s testimony (4:39); and (iv) their climactic confession of Jesus as the Saviour of the world (4:42) very likely includes the woman’s confession. The blind man’s explicit response to Jesus is both verbal and non-verbal: he exclaims ‘Lord, I believe’ and prostrates himself before Jesus in an act of worship. Considering how he progresses in his understanding of Jesus during his interrogation, this response is proper and adequate. It also brings to a climax the remarkable development of someone who was a socio-religious outcast to one who gains spiritual sight and a place in God’s new society. Judas’s responses are clearly inadequate: (i) he surrenders to the devil’s influence (13:2); (ii) in a non-verbal response to Jesus’ last attempt to reach out to him, Judas accepts the piece of bread and seals his lot (13:26–27); (iii) in another non-verbal response, Judas leaves the fellowship of Jesus and enters the darkness (13:30); (iv) he betrays Jesus (18:2–3).

How should we rate the ‘secret belief’-response of some of the Jewish authorities (12:42) and Joseph of Arimathea (19:38)? A few indicators point to the inadequacy of such a response. First, 12:43 explains that, besides fear, the authorities’ desire for human praise contributes to their lack of open confession – an attitude that Jesus has criticized earlier (5:44). Second, the Fourth Evangelist has been implicitly critical of the blind man’s parents, who refrain from testifying because of ‘the fear of the Jews’, which stands in sharp contrast to their son’s bold testimony. Third, at Jesus’ burial, the fearful Joseph of Arimathea is accompanied by the ambiguous Nicodemus, whose response we have evaluated as inadequate.

Some final comments. First, we must note that although characters’ responses can be typical, a response is not necessarily bound to one person (e.g., the response of defection is displayed by some disciples in 6:60–66, as well as by Peter and Judas), nor is a person restricted to one response (e.g., Peter responds both adequately and inadequately). Second, the character’s *response* is evaluated rather than the character. The Fourth Evangelist is not warning us to dissociate from Nicodemus as a character as much as his response to Jesus. Nor should we judge Peter harshly. Peter is (and remains) firmly at Jesus’ side (cf. his restoration in 21:15–19 after his temporary defection), but he is far from perfect, shifting between adequate responses (his corporate confession in 6:68–69; his confessions in 21:15–17) and inadequate responses (his misunderstandings in 13:6–10 and 18:10–11; his denial; his sulking comparison with the Beloved Disciple in 21:20–22). We must refrain from judging Peter as wholly good or Nicodemus as bad. Instead, we analyse each of their responses to Jesus and evaluate them as adequate or inadequate. Third, we refrain from plotting the characters’ responses along a continuum of faith because that would assume some sort of rating. Can we possibly decide whether belief in Jesus’ words or belief in Jesus’ signs is ‘better’, whether testifying, following or abiding in Jesus is closer to the ideal, or whether antipathy is worse than apathy? This is the difficulty we have with Culpepper’s taxonomy, ranking the various belief-responses of the characters.¹⁴⁶ With these caveats, we can compile the results into two tables:

CHARACTER	RESPONSE TOWARDS JESUS
Nathanael, Martha	resembling the ideal confession of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God
Nicodemus	ambiguous, sympathetic but uncommitted/indecisive
Samaritan woman	progressive understanding resulting in an adequate belief-response as she testifies to her kinsfolk
Blind man	progression from blindness to spiritual (in)sight, from not knowing Jesus to understanding that he is from God to confessing belief in him
Judas	defection, apostasy, betrayal
Peter	belief, defection, insight, misunderstanding
Joseph of Arimathea	‘secret belief’ instigated by fear

¹⁴⁵ Considering her progressive understanding of Jesus, 4:29 should probably be translated as ‘Is he perhaps the Christ?’, cautiously suggesting an affirmative answer rather than serious doubt.

¹⁴⁶ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, pp. 146–148.

TYPE OF RESPONSE	EVALUATION	CHARACTER TYPIFYING THE RESPONSE
ambiguity	inadequate	Nicodemus
misunderstanding	inadequate	Nicodemus, Peter, Samaritan woman
'secret belief'	inadequate	Joseph of Arimathea, perhaps Nicodemus
defection	inadequate	Peter, Judas
apostasy	inadequate	Judas
betrayal	inadequate	Judas
confession of Jesus' identity	adequate	Nathanael, Martha, Peter, Samaritan woman, blind man
understanding Jesus' identity	adequate	Samaritan woman, blind man
testifying about Jesus	adequate	Samaritan woman, blind man

Conclusion

Most scholars who have studied characters in the Fourth Gospel have not gone beyond describing their traits; they have classified neither the characters nor their belief-responses. This is partly due to the lack of a proper theory of character. We contend that any theoretical framework for analysing characters in the Fourth Gospel must fulfil four criteria. First, it must recognize that many Johannine characters are not flat, static, one-dimensional or typecast, and that we can use insights from ancient and modern methods of characterization. In our search for a hermeneutical framework to interpret character in the Fourth Gospel, we turned to Hebrew biblical narrative, ancient Greek literature and modern fiction. Rather than contrasting understandings of character, we observed that character in these three types of literature can be viewed on a spectrum ranging from static, flat, ethical type characters to dynamic, round, 'psychological' characters. On this spectrum, ancient Greek literature would tend towards the first type of characterization, and Hebrew biblical narrative and modern fiction towards the latter, but both types of characterization can be found in all this literature. We have also suggested that character itself probably moves along a continuum rather than existing in fixed categories.

Second, a theory must recommend the reconstruction of character from the information in the text and from other sources (textual or non-textual). A suitable method that is text-centred and yet able to look outside the text if required or if the text invites the reader to do so, is historical narrative criticism or a combination of a narratological and historical approach.

Third, the Johannine characters must be classified for their own sake. Here, we have used Yosef Ewen's non-reductionist classification with the three continua of complexity, development and penetration into the inner life. This classification then informs a resultant continuum of degree of characterization – from agent to type to personality to individual.

Fourth, the characters' responses to Jesus which are typical and correspond to responses in real life in any context and time must be classified for the reader's sake. Such a classification of belief-responses must correspond to the soteriological purpose and dualistic worldview of the Fourth Gospel, i.e., it must take into account its evaluative point of view. We have argued that the Fourth Evangelist uses an array of characters and responses to resemble people and their choices in real life. Readers must evaluate these responses in the light of the purpose stated in John 20:31. A theory of Johannine character must also explain how this wide array of responses to Jesus fits within the dualistic worldview of the Fourth Gospel that only allows for acceptance and rejection, adequate and inadequate. We have suggested that the broad spectrum of the characters' responses reflects human life with all its variety while the dualistic worldview corresponds to the divine perspective in which there is only scope for light or darkness, life or death. We contend that our theory is adequate to analyse the Johannine characters although further study must provide the evidence.¹⁴⁷ Our proposed theory can presumably be extended to the Synoptic Gospels and Acts.

¹⁴⁷ I hope to offer this in my forthcoming book on Johannine characters (see n. 12 for details).