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PERSONS AND PATTERNS OF FAITH IN ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL

By Bryan Hackett,
Degree of Master of Arts,
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ABSTRACT

St. John tells his readers that his purpose for writing the Gospel is 'in order that you may believe'. This challenges us to investigate how he persuades readers to believe, and what he persuades them to believe. His use of language concentrates on the activities of believing and knowing. His method is to choose to tell the stories of the encounters of individuals and groups with Christ, rather than to make long theological statements.

The development of literary criticism has given us an opportunity to examine these stories with an appropriate methodology. Narrative criticism, in particular, has been developed recently on the Gospel of John. Whilst still in its early days, much promising work has already been done.

I have used the results of this work to investigate how John uses characters to convey the nature of faith. I have chosen three characters, namely, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the blind man. I draw out the connections between each of them and with other parts of the Gospel, as well as emphasising the distinctiveness of each episode. Through a survey of the plot, the themes, the characters and the various literary devices, I explore how these characters journey in faith, and how at the same time, so does the reader.

At the same time, I use the work of Michael Polanyi, the scientist and philosopher of knowledge, as a background framework for a discussion of faith, and against which to measure the thought of John. Polanyi's philosophy has been compared with John, especially for its stress on an indwelling truth, on the personal nature of knowledge, and the participatory and responsive role of the person seeking revelation.

PERSONS AND PATTERNS OF FAITH IN ST. JOHN'S GOSPEL

by

Bryan Malcolm Hackett

A Thesis Submitted

for the Degree of Master of Arts

University of Durham

Department of Theology

1997

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Declaration

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Chapter One

Introduction

Contents :

1. The Gospel of John
2. Personal Knowledge : Michael Polanyi
3. Exploring Johannine Faith

1. The Gospel of John

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how St. John attempts to achieve what he says is the central goal of the Fourth Gospel, that the reader may believe in the Risen Christ (20. 31). My approach is twofold. I shall be utilising the researches of literary critics so as to highlight John's skills as a writer in pursuing his aim; and at the same time I shall be using, as a subsidiary theme, the work of a philosopher of knowledge, Michael Polanyi, which provides an illuminating twentieth century perspective on faith and knowledge, having much in common with John and helping us to understand him. Issues of faith and knowledge necessarily involve us in an arena of cross-disciplinary concern and dispute. Biblical hermeneutics and scholarship, theologies of revelation, and epistemology, are amongst those topics which would have to be explored in much more depth in order to understand the wider significances of these contributions. This introductory chapter takes a brief look at the gospel in question, together with a survey of the work of Polanyi. This initial survey of some of the crucial issues is followed by a look at the methodology of approach in chapter 2. I shall then use three characters from the gospel to illustrate how John conveys his convictions about believing and knowing the Risen Christ.

Those who come to believe in Christ generally come to believe in a Christ who is a composite picture of the four very distinctive portraits of Christ presented by the four Evangelists. The majority of believers - and non-believers - are not very aware of the nature of and reasons for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John writing such varied sketches of their Lord. John's Christ is I believe the most recognisably 'different' of the four presentations, and I wish to respond creatively to that uniqueness, without putting undue weight on the differences over the similarities.

William Temple once wrote of St. John's characteristic mentality :

' He often records argument in debate, but he does not argue from premises to conclusions as a method of apprehending truth. Rather he puts together the various constituent parts of truth and contemplates them in their relations to one another. Thus he seems to say "look at A; now look at B; now at AB; now at C; now at BC; now at AC; now at D and E; now at ABE; now at CE", and so on in any variety of combination that facilitates new insight. It is the method of artistic apprehension, and is appropriate to truth which is in no way dependent on, or derived from, other truth, but makes its own direct appeal to reason, heart and conscience'.¹

John tells his story by way of allusion, metaphor, and poetry. His vocabulary is full of words that are encased in layer upon layer of meaning : glory, truth, knowledge, regeneration, belief, word, life, light, love and many more. There are many long and complex discourses which are involved and thought - provoking. John gleans patterns and associations between his many themes. He dwells on the spiritual significance of the factual events in Jesus' life, and he constantly looks forward to the future significance and implications of the gospel.

What has the distinctiveness of the Johannine Christ to do with the nature of belief? No gospel has been subject to so much dispute in such a varied way over its origins and purpose. It is the most spiritual, or the most human; it is the most Jewish or the most Greek; it is the earliest or the latest.² But sometimes speculation over the authorship, or the Johannine community, or the philosophical milieu, or cultural or historical circumstances, has been allowed to stand in the way of a consideration of the particular contours of this gospel. We are told very clearly the author's proclaimed persuasive purpose, that it has been written " in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may have life by his name' (20. 31, REB). The declared purpose of the book is identical with the purpose Jesus reveals for his presence in the world, and the very nature of eternal life : 'This is eternal life : to know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'. (17.3).

In a way in which the other gospels and the Johannine Epistles are not, some maintain that John's gospel is christocentric rather than theocentric.³ In the gospel Jesus is light, in 1 John that is said of God; knowing God depends on knowing Jesus in the gospel, but in 1 John it is an unmediated experience;

¹ W.Temple, Readings in St. John's Gospel (1908),p.xxi.

² See, e.g., David Rensberger, Overcoming the World (1988), ch.1.

³ E.g , J.Lieu, Theology of the Johannine Epistles (1991), p.78.

for the gospel 'abiding' is only possible in Christ, but in 1 John it is also possible directly in God. Jesus is the origin of truth (16 : 13-14), which can be a part of present experience. Knowing God is the personal activity of knowing Jesus, and so truth is approached in personal terms. But knowing God is not simply a matter of orientating mind and soul in a Christ-wards direction. The decision for faith has ethical and ecclesiological consequences - 'anyone who dwells in me, as I dwell in him, bears much fruit' (15.5). The 'words used to describe the relationship of Father and Son, of Son and believer, and believer with believer, are words like love, trust, know and abide, which are all much more common in John than in any other gospel. What sort of picture of Jesus would the church have without the Johannine Christ?

This is the most personal of all the gospels. The author tells of his close association with Jesus (e.g., 21.3,4.); the narrative unfolds as a sequence of intricately connected and enveloping personal encounters between Christ and assorted people who manifest varying degrees of increasing faith or unbelief; and it is the gospel which most clearly and explicitly addresses and involves its readership, 'that you may believe'. At the outset, then, we may expect issues of believing and knowing to be personal both in character and in their language of expression. In this gospel John presents these issues in the language of encounter and relationship. The characters who walk in and out of the narrative are not there primarily to be recipients of teaching or objects of miracle-working, but also to be representative examples of the stages along the journeys of faith and unbelief.

The theological Christocentricity and narrative centrality of Jesus can be observed in John's deployment of the cast of supporting actors. Every character works in two ways. One way is to bring out Jesus' character by giving him varied individuals and groups with whom to interact. The other way is to demonstrate a variety of responses to Jesus, involving degrees of understanding and misunderstanding. As Culpepper notes, the other characters rarely interact one with another, and Jesus is at the centre of all exchanges, whether he is absent or present.⁴ What difference, then, has the incarnation made to the nature of Christian knowledge and belief? How has the redemption affected the human capacity for belief, or the object of belief?

The very first words Christ asks in this gospel are, "What are you looking for?" (1.38). Dynamics of questioning and answering, of seeking and finding, of finding and losing again, permeate this gospel. Pilate speaks more

⁴ A. Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel (1983), p.145.

than for himself when he asks "What is truth?" The wealth of historical, geographical and physical detail thoroughly earths what could otherwise seem a metaphysical quest. The challenge Jesus posed of Martha is the one posed of every reader of this gospel : "Do you believe this?"

John gives the Judaeo-Christian tradition a new vocabulary, one that more than the other gospels becomes the decisive source of words and phrases for the development of Christianity. For the church's favourite word, love, although quite common in the Psalms and in St.Paul, is primarily found in only this one of the four gospels. The verb and the noun appear 54 times in John; Luke is the next closest with a mere 13 mentions. There is an even greater contrast with the verb 'know', which comes in its various forms over 100 times in John; again, the nearest Synoptic is Luke with about 33 uses. Other words which are very prominent in John but are far less so in the Synoptics include : see, truly, truth, believe, word, world, life, sent, testify, sin , comes, coming, and hour. This is the only gospel in which Jesus addresses a specific group of people as his own friends, and mixes the challenge and threat of "you are clean through the word which I have spoken to you", with the comfort and consolation of knowing things and knowing people. He knows when his impending departure will occur; he knows why it has come about; and he knows where he is going. Every detail of Jesus' revelation of what he knows and what he wants his followers to know is exceedingly personal and intimate in its reference and application. There seems to be an inextricable link between Christ's proffered friendship and the nature of the believer's faith and knowledge of him.

Any account of the issues of belief and knowledge in the Fourth Gospel must take note of how markedly this gospel gives such attention to personal relationships, to the truth that our relation to God is that which shows itself in relation to our fellow human-beings; and how in terms of talk of Christ, the great bulk of the Fourth Gospel is taken up with a description of human relations, with Jesus inviting people to learn from that personal contact what manner of man he was. John's special emphasis on love is detailed in the gospel by the way in which 'men and women in turn are invited to learn through every stage of their creaturely existence what it means to be loved and loving. He made himself one with us that by that union we might learn to know him'.⁵

⁵ A.Ecclestone, The Scaffolding of Spirit (1987), p.111.

2. Personal Knowledge and Michael Polanyi

Philosophical and scientific opinions about the nature of truth, reality, and the scope of human knowledge have since the Enlightenment tended to set the trend for theological discussions of these issues. But as the challenge and critique of such enlightenment thinking has progressed, so new ideas have come to the fore over the nature of knowledge. The thought of one philosopher in particular has gained currency in the science and religion debates, and his analysis and terminology do, at first sight, tie in remarkably well with John's treatment of faith and knowledge. This thinker is Michael Polanyi.

Polanyi developed a relational rather than an objectivising conception of the knower and the known; stressing that our relationship to a person or thing is primary to our knowing them. Rational, conceptual knowledge arises out of the knowledge by acquaintance that characterises our human situation in the universe. Because we are acquainted with our universe as its inhabitants, and because we are in a concrete relation to it, we can begin to develop, by the use of our intellectual and other faculties, some account of our knowledge. Even the more rational and abstract forms of knowledge are no exceptions to the concrete mode of our everyday interaction with reality. Rather, they are continuous with them because they arise from within a concrete relation. The crucial concept is one of indwelling. We do not contemplate reality from the outside, from a godlike distance - 'objectivism' - but we indwell the world as part of it. All knowledge arises out of and as a function of relation. (This metaphor of indwelling can be seen to correspond with its use in John's gospel, where the Son indwells the Father, believers indwell Christ, and the Spirit indwells them). Polanyi's is a description of a kind of knowledge that is subjective in the sense of being personal, but also objective in that it is concerned with the truth about things. It is a concept of insightful perception, and has occasionally been compared⁶ with attempts by scholars to find an hierarchical scheme in John's gospel, i.e. starting from mere registration of a visual image, then to looking at something with concentration and fascination, then to seeing with unitive understanding, and finally to seeing in the sense that occurs between people in a loving encounter.

Polanyi's view of true human knowledge is that it involves personal commitment, and the acceptance of personal responsibility for one's

⁶ See e.g. F. Watts and M. Williams, The Psychology of Religious Knowing , (1989).

beliefs. This knowledge is personal but not subjective - it is objective in the way that it makes contact with a hidden reality. He emphasises that there is no way to find truth unless we are willing to accept the risk of making mistakes along the way. Polanyi's thought is now regarded as seminal, and one book, Personal Knowledge, as a classic.⁷ He has been credited with moving modern philosophy away from its inheritance of Enlightenment epistemology.⁸

From his background as a scientist, Polanyi expounded the role of discovery in attaining true knowledge. He explained how a process of discovery involves much tedious groundwork and many setbacks, until one day a flash of inspiration happens, when insight is gained of something which does not quite fit the normal rules (or the usual limitations of thinking). The skill of discovery lies in an ability to recognise the significant facts from amongst the vast army of data and the huge variety of hypotheses. This is where creativity and inventiveness are needed - along with passion. 'Any process of enquiry ungirded by intellectual passions would inevitably spread out into a desert of trivialities'.⁹ Insight does not necessarily mean seeing new facts - it may more probably involve seeing new patterns in the same facts. The initial stirrings of the 'hunch' are the heuristic ideas. It is a personal decision to act on the hunch, to pursue it. Turning fragments into a whole is what that process will involve, once embarked on. It is only the intimations which work, not the use of tried and tested formulae on familiar data. This area of intimation is a kind of category of its own, a dim fore-knowledge. The imaginative leap is known by the sense of getting warm.

Polanyi terms this area of knowledge (i.e. knowledge that is not explicit and exact) 'tacit knowing'- with the emphasis on the verb rather than the noun. He suggests it is in the area not just of understanding, but also of poetic insight and the grasp of moral values. Sometimes he also used a phrase to cover this area : 'we know more than we can tell'. In say, the recognition of your pet dog, you could not list its statistics and measurements and features, but you would know it as your dog amongst many other similar ones. We have a power to recognise a whole, even if we are not too certain about some of the parts. We do not focus on all the parts and then focus on the whole, but we do begin to build up our own picture of what we have identified so far. The

⁷ Watts and Williams, Religious Knowing, p.56.

⁸ C. Gunton, Knowledge and Culture, in H. Montefiore, ed., The Gospel and Contemporary Culture, London :Mowbray ,1992, p.85.

⁹ M. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, London : Routledge Kegan Paul,1958, p. 135.

preconditions for discovery are, underlying all this, both a desire to know, and a belief that there is something to be known.

The structure of tacit knowing involves two parts - the subsidiary and the focal. The subsidiary parts are the details from which we attend, and the focal part is the whole, the meaning on which our attention is focussed. But to get from one to another does not involve formal logical reasoning; it does involve imagination. All the formal frameworks of human science and knowledge are dependent on personal choices about procedure and investigation.

Polanyi particularly concentrated on the sense-perception of sight. He pointed out how much we take it for granted, and forgot how busy and amazing a process it is. Our powers of mental integration can likewise be taken for granted - or they can be trained for further use. Polanyi himself made the connection with Gestalt psychology: 'But having realised that personal participation predominates both in the area of tacit and explicit knowledge, we are ready to transpose the findings of Gestalt psychology into a theory of knowledge'.¹⁰ Polanyi also connected his philosophy with the child development work of Piaget, who demonstrated how babies begin to build up their framework of space and time by their own activities of moving, looking and grasping. Piaget says children develop new levels of logically dealing with the world, moving from one to another. He calls them schemata. Polanyi thought the human race developed in much the same way.¹¹

All this implies that in our knowledge there is a kind of faith, that is, a faith in a reality which we can gradually comprehend. We all have a reservoir of this tacit knowing, and whatever our educational background, we can come to understand our many levelled world because the mind is always integrating the particulars of any situation into higher levels of meaning.

At one point Polanyi elaborates a personal creed :

'I declare myself committed to the belief in an external reality gradually accessible to knowing, and I regard all true understanding as an intimation of such a reality, which, being real, may yet reveal itself to our deepened understanding in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations. I accept the obligation to search for the truth through my own intimations of reality, knowing that there is and can be no strict rule by which my conclusions can be

¹⁰ M. Polanyi, The Study of Man, (1958), p.28.

¹¹ Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, p.395.

justified'.¹²

He cited Christopher Columbus as an instance of a commitment to discovery. The lack of confidence in 'the rules' as such frees us to face reality unfettered. Reality is itself something that draws us on, that is attractive and beguiling. 'If we have grasped a true and deep-seated aspect of reality, then its future manifestations will be unexpected confirmations of our present knowledge of it'.¹³ The more depth of meaning, the more real something is. So, Polanyi went on to argue, a human being or an idea is more real than a cobblestone, because the former has more depth of meaning.

How does the knower relate to the tacit particulars which are clues to the deeper reality? Through indwelling, says Polanyi, this relationship develops. 'Indwelling involves a tacit reliance on our awareness of particulars not under observation, many of them unspecifiable. We have to interiorise these and, in doing so, must change our mental existence. There is nothing definite to which we can hold fast in such an act. It is a free commitment'.¹⁴ As a child grows, he incorporates skills and experience which become part of his tacit knowledge, and amongst these is the use of language. Both in the use of language, and in the wider use of skills, there are some common inherited patterns from the child's family and surroundings, but there is also an individual personal element. Knowledge that has been inwardly digested becomes an extension of the personality. In using it, you concentrate with it, not on it. Faith and risk and knowledge are all connected. Instead of an impersonal set of rules, Polanyi talks of a society of explorers, where the committed person in a group learns skills from the group's tradition in order to develop his own relationship with reality. It is commitment which connects the past with the future, the known with the barely-known. As Polanyi puts it across, we can learn the skills of seeing in a new way, by trying to find new patterns, guided by a belief that there is a discoverable reality.

From his working experience of the scientific community, Polanyi became convinced that science had to be free from any form of external authority, and also that both authority and tradition are vital elements of the free community of science. The combination of scholastic discipline and the desire for originality allow for fresh discoveries eventually to be recognised.

¹² Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, p.311.

¹³ M. Polanyi, The Unaccountable Element in Science, Philosophy, vol. XXXVIII, no. 139, Jan. 1962, p.13.

¹⁴ M. Polanyi, On the Modern Mind, in Encounter XXIV, May 1965, p.9.

The scientific world is a spontaneous, self-governing organisation. It is a community of trust, always involved in free and delicately made value judgments. In science as in art, traditions are handed on by apprenticeships. The way law develops is another parallel. In all these communities, knowledge relies on no impersonal tests but on the skills and responsibility of people.¹⁵

Truth is both personal and social, shared. Individual insight has to be referred to common tradition and judgment (because there is no rule by which to judge it). The explorer makes the most of his tradition, and finds a sense of direction, even if no direct answer. At some point comes a leap of imagination, an intuition that this is the right answer. With other explorers, he can grow in fellowship of the free pursuit of the truth. Intellectual work has, or should have, an atmosphere of conviviality, in which two people can talk and discover errors, or discover that their different opinions are partial expressions of the same reality.

Another key term Polanyi uses is that of 'boundary conditions'. He used it in connection with explaining how life operates by principles which are made possible and limited by physical and chemical laws, but yet are not determined by them. In a given situation, there are laws operating at a lower level which are harnessed, and principles which cannot be accounted for on the lower level. The higher level of organisation in living creatures cannot be explained on the lowest levels. The organisation at the higher level which imposes the boundary condition is in fact an integration of the particulars on the lower level into a meaningful whole (whose principle of integration is not discoverable on the lower level). This Polanyi connects with the pattern of how we know. The power of knowing and grasping the world develops into a power of imaginatively integrating particulars, revealing their joint meaning, which is now the higher level coherence in which they become parts. So the patterns of the world mirror the patterns of our knowing.

Polanyi held to duality, rather than to dualism. He remarked on the profound difference between mind and body, yet held that a person exists on all levels, with neither the boundaries of the mind being fixed, nor the physical brain placing a limit on its activity. Knowledge of the mind is not the same thing as knowledge of the brain. For Polanyi, the mind is the meaning of the brain. The human being, then, exists on different levels, from the lowest to the highest. The latter explain the former, but not vice versa .

¹⁵ M. Polanyi, Knowing and Being. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960, p.66.

The person then consists not just of the self but of all that the person dwells in and has extended itself into. The whole person is involved in building up the reservoir of tacit knowing. The highest level is never defined - it is always the latest frontier to be reached, and further horizons remain. The pattern of human learning is the combining of two opposite tendencies. The first is the building up of frameworks to which new experience is assimilated, and the second is the adapting of these frameworks to accommodate new experience. Polanyi termed them 'dwelling in' and 'breaking out'.

Polanyi's religious faith arose from this dedication to seeking reality. It did not come from any attachment to the orthodox creeds or acceptance of religious authority. Having shown the need for faith in science and knowledge, he allowed faith in religious belief: 'I hold it to be fully consistent with my belief in the transcendent origin of my beliefs that I should be ever prepared for new intimations of doubts in respect of them'.¹⁶ For him, the religious account of meaning was not incompatible but complementary with the scientific account of meaning. Furthermore,

'The Christian enquiry is worship. It resembles, not the dwelling within a great theory of which we enjoy the complete understanding, nor an immersion in the pattern of a musical masterpiece, but the heuristic upsurge which strives to break through the accepted framework of thought, guided by the intimations of discoveries still beyond our horizon. Christian worship sustains, as it were, an eternal, never to be consummated hunch, a heuristic vision, which is accepted for the sake of its unresolvable tension'.¹⁷

So religious understanding is a skill to be learnt, received and handed on, and God's nature can only be known through commitment to him, and through worship of him. Religion is a system of feelings and thoughts in which the human mind can dwell by means of the imaginative integration of the clues it provides. The content of Christian teaching and liturgy is a collection of clues, and from this the meaning of faith is achieved via the tacit art of comprehension. Since the universe consists of hierarchy of levels, religion is the tacit integrating of clues to its higher level meanings. Whilst humans strive to find meaning, there is also a creative power at work which meets this striving - Polanyi sometimes called it 'grace'. In prayer as in science, there are patterns or rhythms of discovery in which there is an urge to meet a reality which is felt to be there. At one point Polanyi described the highest mystical

¹⁶ Quoted in D. Scott, Michael Polanyi, (1996), p.183.

¹⁷ Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, p.281.

vision as a letting go of the categories of our our normal seeing, so that we see all things as features of God.¹⁸

3. Exploring Johannine Faith

The dominance of faith as a theme in the Fourth Gospel could be argued in a number of ways. Although statistics can be misleading and have to be seen in the wider perspective, the great frequency of vocabulary connected with believing and knowing is very telling. But the bulk of studies on faith in John (as in the other gospels) has been done by scholars of tradition-historical traditions, and there has been little attention to the distinctive configurations of belief in the Four Gospels. Earlier treatments suffer from two shortcomings in methodology.¹⁹ The first is an inclination to discuss almost exclusively the words connected with faith, ignoring their narrative context whence they derive their meaning. The second is a concentration on believing as an idea rather than an activity, an idea often increasingly divorced from the variety of literary and dramatic techniques used by the author to convey his message and to integrate it into the wider story.

Instead of this, I shall endeavour to engage in some literary analysis of the text, and employ alongside that a framework for discussing issues of believing, derived from Polanyi. I have found it necessary to employ a framework, because faith is a subject where it is hard to decide and to limit the issues for discussion, and Polanyi's work gives us some hints and directions. The focus throughout will be on the personal nature of faith as expressed through John's use of characterisation, and the patterns of faith that become apparent.

¹⁸ M. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, p.198.

¹⁹ E.g., E.K.Lee, The Religious Thought of John, (1950), esp.ch.9.

The Application of Literary Criticism to the Gospel of John

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Stories, Histories and Biblical Interpretation
3. Types of Literary Criticism
4. Narrative Criticism in Detail
5. Narrative Criticism, Faith and Revelation
6. Development of Literary Criticism of the Fourth Gospel
7. Literary Criticism and the Johannine Community
8. From Theory to Practice

1. Introduction

In this chapter I shall explore the nature and theory of literary criticism, its development and present state, with especial regard to its application to Christian scripture. Then the development of literary critical attitudes to John's Gospel can be placed in context and analysed. The purpose of this is to show how literary criticism unveils the dynamics of the text, and especially how John involves his readers in the story in the pursuit of persuading them to believe.

Because in the case studies in the next three chapters I shall be concentrating on the characters, I shall use this chapter to show a broad overview of literary critical approaches, before focussing on the three characters and the theme of believing.

2. Stories, Histories and the Word of God

How did the Bible come to be seen as a suitable area for literary critical exploration? The ways of reading the Bible can be as diverse as its authors and modes of composition. However as far as nineteenth and twentieth century biblical critical scholarship has been concerned, the dominant approach to the study of scripture has been to use an 'objective' and scientific analysis of the books in the hope of understanding ways of life and thought at the time(s) of biblical composition. In the historical order of their development, historical critical methods have concentrated on the sources of material which has ended up in the Bible, on the growth of the forms of particular Bible

passages, and on the role of the author in selecting and using the material for a book. These methods have all led to a deepening of our understanding both of the Bible and of its original environments.

Yet the Bible cannot be fitted (either by believers or by non-believers) into the sole category of history books. Its many voices bear witness primarily to the human experience of what are believed to be the ways of God. The Bible tells the story of God's relationship with his people. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus' life and ministry in the context of that relationship. The Bible, as a religious text, demands an involvement on the part of the reader that is not demanded of the reader of Tacitus or Livy. The focus of attention has shifted, thanks to literary criticism, away from the community behind the text, or its sources, or its author, to the way the text operates itself as a literary text, rather than as an historical source, and to how it relates to the reader; although, as time has gone on, some literary critics have increasingly returned to some consideration of the historical setting.²⁰ The recognition that the Gospels are pieces of literature, whilst not new, has now led to the application of the techniques of secular literary criticism to sacred narratives. This has not entailed abandoning historical criticism, but rather pursuing other lines of inquiry, such as character development, plots and sub-plots, themes and rhetoric.

But if the gospels are more than just history, are they not also more than just literature? Yes they are, but to study them as literature does not mean the same as identifying them as 'mere' literature. The evangelists themselves chose a mode of communication - narrative discourse - to express themselves. To use the narrative form to represent reality, to tell stories about life, is a medium which belongs both to art and history, and utilises the conventions of both to the utmost.

The main area of concern, then, for the biblical literary critic, is the relationship between the text and its readers. Who wrote it, when, why, and where, are questions that are, to them, of secondary importance to the subject, although in practice some literary critical scholars do prefer still to include them - as we shall see in the debate between Culpepper and Stibbe. With particular relevance to this thesis, it is important to note that the development of the concept of the implied author tends to replace interest in the actual author. Questions about the implied author's theology should, in theory, be considered from within the text alone, and not from external

²⁰ See, e.g., G.S.Sloyan, What are they saying about John?, (1991).

material, although in practice the influence of the Old Testament in particular comes up for discussion. All that is needed to comprehend the literary meaning and impact of a narrative should be garnered from the study of the implied author.

The key differences between historical and literary criticism are fourfold. Firstly, literary criticism prefers, to put it crudely, aesthetics to archaeology. The text, as it is, in its finished form, is the sole text of interest, and not any earlier variants, extant or imagined. Secondly, literary critics take an holistic approach. Preferring a sense of the whole to a preoccupation with parts, literary critics have sensitivity to the role of any item within its full context. Thirdly, whereas historical critics treat the text as a window on to another time and another place, literary critics regard the text as a mirror, which reflects the reader's own world and conveys its own story at the same time. Fourthly, whilst historical critics basically approach texts on the assumption that they are products of an evolutionary process of development, literary critics assume that texts are forms of communication. Historical critics move from historical event to oral tradition to early written sources and then to the final text. But literary criticism is heavily indebted in its philosophical origins to theories about communication, in which the author and text and reader interact with one another. The text stands in an horizontal plane between the author and reader, unlike the evolutionary model when it is at one end of the vertical axis as the finished product.

3. Types of Literary Criticism

Although it is impossible to reach a clear-cut categorisation of the varied ways of reading the text, it is possible to give an idea of the general groupings into which they can be placed. One helpful form of categorisation of the various theoretical approaches is based on the idea of M. H. Abrams.²¹ When the focus of attention is on the author, the critical approaches are 'expressive' types of criticism, and the criteria for evaluating the text is by its faithfulness and appropriateness for conveying the writer's opinion. When the centre of attention is the reader, the critical approaches are called 'pragmatic' types, and the consideration is of the methods and degree of success in moving the reader. When the text is the issue, they are 'objective' types of criticism and the text is examined in its own right as a world unto itself. When

²¹ M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 4th ed., New York, Holt 1981, quoted in M.Powell, 'What is Narrative Criticism?' (1990), p.11.

the degree of fair representation of reality is the issue, they are called 'mimetic' types of criticism. Under these categories, the approaches I shall adopt are largely pragmatic.

In practice though, most critical approaches to the Bible have been grouped into two parties: those concerned with origins, and those concerned with the reading experience.²² The first group are therefore historical critical, and the second group literary critical. This second group can be subdivided as follows in this very brief outline :

i) *Structuralism*

This movement is a search for meaning in a text which tries to take account of all kinds of relationships (e.g. of dynamics, time, theme) beyond the plot outline alone. The text itself consists of several layers of structures, one on top of another. The ones lower down, the 'deep structures' are the most interesting, for they can reveal attitudes which the author may not have been aware of holding.

ii) *Rhetorical Criticism*

This discipline seeks to discover how and why a text has the power to move people. Crucial to understanding a text's effectiveness is an understanding of the rhetorical situation that is being addressed, and therefore the work's original audience needs to be comprehended. This school is more interested in the mechanics than the final product.

iii) *Reader Response Criticism*

This method of reading studies the reading process in itself. There is quite a spectrum of types of reader response criticism, but they all examine the nature of the reader's reaction to the text, and the ways meaning is brought out of it. Some schools attribute to the reader dominance over the text, deconstruction being the most famous of these. To counter the individualism and subjectivity of this style, the idea of interpretive communities has been proposed, in which a shared strategy of reading can be adopted. Theories which put the text and the reader on the same level stress the interaction between the two. In a sequential reading of a narrative, a reader will constantly be challenged to confirm, revise or abandon earlier conclusions about the nature of the story. Moreover, the creative role of the reader will also try to fill the gaps for which the author has provided no comment.

4) *Narrative Criticism*

The most important concept of narrative criticism is that of the

²² Powell, *Narrative Criticism*?, ch.2.

implied reader. Whereas the first three approaches depended, respectively, on a skilful reader, or an original audience, or a first time audience, narrative critical methods dwell on the connections between the implied author, the text, and the implied reader. This marks narrative criticism out from reader response criticism, which is largely concerned with the real reader. Ultimately the aim of narrative criticism is to be able to read the text in the way the real author intended the implied reader to read it. To some extent this means unlearning, for example, what one knows from the other gospels; or, in the other direction, acquiring knowledge that the evangelists take for granted - the nature of Jewish festivals perhaps. Whilst the notion of an implied reader remains a concept rather than a reality, it nevertheless allows an opportunity to examine the text according to certain valuable criteria.

Narrative criticism is distinctive for four reasons. Firstly, it shares with structuralism a text-centred approach, but it differs in that it prefers to examine the linear, rather than deep, relationships, of the story. Secondly, it shares with rhetorical criticism an interest in the effect of a text upon a reader. Yet the former is more grounded in the text, because the latter is geared more to looking at the external audience. Thirdly, it places the reader firmly in the text as the implied reader, whilst reader response methods assume the reader is external to the text, creating meaning through a dominant or equal relationship with it. Fourthly, its boundaries are not watertight, and it can be flexible enough at times to be indistinguishable from some forms of reader response criticism.

It is because narrative criticism is concerned with the implied reader, rather than with one particular historical setting only, that it is appropriate to discuss the potential uses of this discipline on a Gospel which is so geared to inspiring a vibrant and active response from its readership, 'that you may believe'.

4. Narrative Criticism in Detail²³

A narrative, defined as a work of literature that tells a story, has two aspects. Firstly, its content, the 'what', the story, which consists of a number

²³ See Powell, Narrative Criticism?, chs.3 - 6.

of elements interacting to make up the plot, namely events, characters, and settings. Secondly, its rhetoric, the 'how', the discourse, the methods of telling the story. One story can be told in several different ways, e.g. Jesus' life. There are four main aspects to discourse, which I shall discuss first.

(a) The Workings of Narrative : Discourse

i] *Point of view* : The implied author places the story in the context of his world view, with all its values and assumptions. The implied reader must accept these for the period of reading, otherwise there can be no engagement with the text. For example, John's gospel is written from the point of view of one familiar with first century Palestine.

ii] *Narration* : The implied author uses a voice to tell the story. Implicitly the author asks the trust of the implied reader, for the time being. The author has at hand a variety of techniques to encourage the implied reader's dependence - hinting that he knows far more than he tells, as John does, and sharing opinions on the reliability or not of others. Some narrators never appear in the story, whilst some, like John, sometimes appear with a 'we', personally addressing the implied reader.

iii] *Symbolism and Irony* : These are chief amongst the ways in which an implied author helps the reader to pick and choose amongst a variety of opinions, and to finally concur with the author. Frequently in the Fourth Gospel Christ or the narrator have to resort to correcting false opinions; or phrases pregnant with meaning like 'living waters' are left hanging and unexplained, so as to excite further interest. All literary devices have their home in the relationship between the implied author and implied reader. The panoply of such devices pushes the reader in a certain direction, even if an exact meaning cannot be pinned down. The use of irony especially leads the reader to be wary of treating words and actions at face value, and to seek out further hidden meanings. Together with symbolism, the use of irony gives the reader a sense of uncertainty, and a need to read and re-read, to try to get deeper into the text.

iv] *Narrative Patterns* : The tricks of the author's trade are known as 'narrative patterns'. They are utilised to help to structure and convey the story, and a study of them reveals the author's priorities. There are a number of lists of such patterns, but the list commended by Powell is as follows ²⁴ : repetition,

²⁴ Powell, Narrative Criticism?, p. 32 - 33.

contrast, comparison, causation and substantiation, climax, pivot, particularisation and generalisation, statements of purpose, preparation, summarisation, interrogation, inclusio, interchange, chiasm, and intercalation. When, where, why and how often they are used has a great effect on the reader. Chiasmic patterns have been the subject of much interest in Johannine studies.

(b) The Workings of Narrative : Story

Events, characters and settings are together the constituent parts of a story, and the plot arises from the interaction between them.

1) Events

An 'event' is a wide category, which does not just refer to physical actions, but also to sayings, thoughts and feelings.

(i) There is a hierarchy of importance amongst all the events of story, and some of them are crucial to its development, and others add something which does not make much difference. These are known respectively as *kernels and satellites*. Studies of the structure of this gospel would show an event like the wedding feast at Cana to be a kernel ; the woman caught in adultery episode would be a satellite. In contrast, historical criticism would place this episode outside the gospel as unoriginal.

(ii) *Order* : There are two sets of time in a narrative. One form of time is discourse time, that is the order in which the narrator relates events. The other form is story time, which is the original order of events in the story as a whole, and may well not be the same as the order in which they are related. When there are discrepancies between the two kinds of time, we have what are called anachronies. These are themselves divided into two main groups; analepses and prolepses. Analepses refer to events which are narrated belatedly, and prolepses to events which are narrated prematurely. If the earlier or later is within the bounds of the story, it is an internal anachrony; if it occurs before or after the story time, it is an external anachrony.

(iii) *Duration* : The length of narrative devoted to reporting an event is often quite different to the length of real time in which the event occurred. The narrator has a number of devices available to accelerate or decelerate the speed of the narrative, and these accentuate or play down some features. A long process may be summarised in a moment; a scene may be reported word for word; a moment in a stream of consciousness can be dealt with at great length. Contrast, for instance, the amount of space given

over to the farewell discourse in relation to the other three years of Christ's ministry.

(iv) *Frequency* : Usually an event is reported once , but it may be reported once or several times. Obviously the more use of repetition the more significant the event is.

(v) *Causation* : Narrative criticism concentrates on the connections between parts of a narrative , and therefore on elements of causality which relate one event to another. These connections can be contingent, or probable or possible. Historical criticism looks at the thematic or sequential relationships, but not at the deeper workings of the story.

(vi) *Conflict* : The human mind searches for order and resolution, for structure and (happy) endings, and whatever obstructs these in a narrative is significant. Conflict most influences characterisation - a character can be in conflict with himself, or with other characters, or with some larger force, like nature or society or destiny. Conflict generates excitement, energy and intensity, and is felt in its intensity by the reader. The Fourth Gospel is driven by the conflict between Jesus and the world.

2) Characters

Characters, whether individuals or groups, carry out the activities of the plot. They have particular roles, but often exceed in interest the main purpose for which they have been put there. Authors tell their readers about the characters either directly, telling the reader explicitly about their reputation or characteristics, or indirectly, showing their characters' nature through their speeches, actions thoughts, values and interactions with others. How the narrator himself relates to the characters, showing who he approves or disapproves of is done through his indication of the values and world views of the participants, and explicit or implicit comparison with others. Many literary critics quote E. M. Forster's famous distinction between flat characters and round characters. The former are very predictable, the latter more interesting because they can possess a variety of traits which may come into conflict. With regard to the gospels, being such brief narratives, perhaps the labels 'static' and 'dynamic' are most appropriate, for they apply to the development or otherwise of a character's main traits over the course of the narrative. Most of all, the use of characters can create for the reader a sense of involvement in the essentially human experience of the narrative. By giving chances for

sympathy or antipathy to be felt towards certain characters, the narrator can push the reader along a certain direction. Empathy is the most powerful emotion the narrator can stir up, empathy for the realities of life faced by characters in the narrative, and empathy for the highest ideals when they tune in with the reader's ideals.

3). Settings

Settings are the theatre stages of the narrative. They can function in several different ways: they may provide some of the structure of the story, influence conflict, contribute to character development, or form part of the symbolic structure.

(a) Spatial settings. Both the 'props' and the 'back cloths' of a setting's space are material to this sphere of interest. The use of contrast - city versus country, plain versus mountain, sea versus land - is very common. By extension, the crossing of physical boundaries can be made to bear further meanings. The brevity of the gospel narratives can be seen in the sparseness of detail and of evocation of atmosphere in the description of settings. Perhaps rather in the spirit of much modern theatre, the spartan detail contributes towards the reader's freedom to experience the setting in a variety of ways, and appropriate its meaning accordingly.

(b) Temporal settings : (i) Chronological time, when, used in the locative sense, this refers to an event transpiring at a particular time , whether a briefer or a longer event; and when used in the durative sense, this refers to an interval of time, rather than a particular date.

(ii) Typological time, which refers to the nature of the time in which something occurs regularly and repeatedly. Day or night, winter or summer, Sabbath or weekday, are all common types of time in the gospels. The religious calendar is an obvious example of this.

Furthermore, it is possible to distinguish , as Ricoeur has done, between mortal time and monumental time.²⁵ The categories listed are all contained within the notion of 'mortal time', as measured by people both real and fictional. Monumental time is the universe's time, and is beyond measurement and the course of human history.

(c) Social settings : This is another broad category,

²⁵ Quoted in Powell, Narrative Criticism, p.73-4.

encompassing the nature of economy, class, social customs, politics and the wider cultural setting of a narrative. This may sound close to historical critical interests, but where it differs is that the information is absorbed by narrative critical scholars to aid understanding of the story, rather than the practice of historical critical scholars, which is to extract elements from the story in order to build up a picture of what events took place in real life.

5. Narrative Criticism, Faith and Revelation

The nature of narrative criticism needs to be put within the wider setting of biblical hermeneutics. Because the science of hermeneutics is precisely about the nature of the relationship between text and reader, there are clearly questions of epistemology involved. What can I know? How can I know it? Is knowledge an achievement or a process? Can it be parcelled up and handed over, or must it be experienced? What connections are there between the ways of knowing which God granted to the human beings he made, and the effect of the revelation and redemption on how they can know God, and what they can find in God?

Christian teaching has always been that there is room for the Holy Spirit to work between text and reader. In doctrinal terms, the revelation continues, there is a continual revealing, and it is not a finished item. Since also a text can give a variety of meanings, there is space for an understanding of the variety of effects of scripture upon a reader, and of the variety of potential responses. Furthermore, if as I said in the Introduction, Christian faith and knowing are essentially personal and relational in character, one may wish to make connections between the human character of stories, and the manner in which we appropriate any information and ideas which has a transformative effect on our lives. It may well be that the most fundamental thought processes of perceiving and conceiving are intimately linked with the shape of stories. The manner in which we conceive of ourselves and of our world seems to be most profoundly formed and reformed by stories, whatever their degree of life-likeness. In taking time out from our life to look at it from a different point of view, we may well return changed in a way that argument based on theory, principle and evidence could not have achieved to the same degree. When Biblical stories are respected for their narrative form, they are found to have within them a message - or messages - which cannot be contained within any particular doctrinal form, and therefore an individual personal response to them is drawn out.

Finally, narrative criticism is ultimately dependent on a hermeneutics that claims that meaning does not reside in a text, but has a potential there for meaning which awaits realisation when the reader engages with the text. Narrative criticism sees meaning coming through the story, and this meaning is constant, not time-bound. The notion that the poetic function of a narrative surpasses its historical and referential function is something that has been recognised for some time.²⁶ But only now has narrative criticism put that on a firm critical footing.

John's theology of the creative word acting as the judge between light and darkness is a suitable metaphor for the power of the Gospel text. The all-creating, all-knowing Logos, continues to operate as word, through John's speech, and through the text. The light shines in the darkness, into the mind of the reader. We think we examine the text, but in the end the text effectively examines us. John (though un-named) assures us of his veracity, 'we know', but the world cannot contain the truth, 'all the books that could be written'. Christ divides the seekers from the blind, and draws out from Pilate, "What is truth?" The irony is that Pilate does not realise who is really on trial, nor who is really confronting him, nor that he is asking the basic question of Jesus' life and John's story. Jesus stands before Pilate as the text stands before us; he and it being there not to be analysed, not for a dialogue between two equal partners, but as a question mark, which is instead analysing us.

Hermeneutical treatments of John demonstrate common areas of interest with narrative criticism.²⁷ Taking their cue from such philosophers as Gadamer and Ricoeur, they suggest that understanding is the fundamental mode of human being. To be human is to understand, and so understanding is the primary form of our ontology. When it comes to the interpretation of texts, understanding, in its fullest sense, involves the 'fusion of horizons', in which aesthetic surrender and existential interpretation play their part. Appreciation and appropriation both have a role. The achievement of the fusion is done by what Polanyi would call the 'hunch'.

²⁶ Luther indeed saw three stages to revelation; firstly, as an historical event, secondly, as the public proclamation of that event through the Bible, and thirdly as the moment in which that message is received and understood by its hearers. Quoted in Powell, Narrative Criticism? p.99.

²⁷ See, e.g. S.Schneiders, The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture, (1991).

6.The Development of Literary Criticism on John's Gospel

The recent development of literary criticism as a discipline in its own right does not entail that only now are people looking at the Gospel for the first time as a literary piece of work. Stibbe gives a list of some earlier twentieth century approaches to John as literature.²⁸ Some of these earlier writers were clearly aware of the text not just as a literary work but also as a dramatic text, and they showed sensitivity to its literary features in a way which was not at first fashionable. There are now two leading authors on the subject of literary criticism applied to John's Gospel. One is the American scholar Alan Culpepper, the other one is the British Mark Stibbe. I wish to explore at more length the work of these two writers as case studies in literary critical work on John.

(i) The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel by Alan Culpepper

This work was the first major explosion into the world of Johannine scholarship of literary criticism. Published 12 years ago, it still serves as the main text for this line of enquiry. Apart from the occasional monograph or specialised piece very little had been done to apply the new methods of literary criticism to the gospel, and he was the first to do so systematically.²⁹ He organised his areas of investigation into the following categories : narrator and point of view, narrative time, plot, characterisation, implicit commentary, and the implied reader.

Culpepper explored how the author used his life and experiences, his imagination and reflections to recreate the story of Jesus in such a way that its first hearers could enter into the world he had known. Taking the role of the narrator of the story, the implied reader guides his readers with occasional interventions and frequent judgments, thus inclining the reader to trust his point of view. Most importantly, he shapes much of the reader's response to the central character, Jesus, partly through such comments, partly through his display of omniscience over Jesus' origins and destiny, and also through his use of characters whose colours he paints largely by the nature of their response to Jesus. One character, and one character only, (apart from Jesus) is portrayed in entirely favourable terms, and that is the Beloved Disciple, who incarnates the example of true faith.

²⁸ M. Stibbe, John as Storyteller, (1992), p.9.

²⁹ M.Stibbe, John's Gospel, (1994) p.1-2.

The key to understanding the Fourth Gospel's fundamental unity and coherence, argues Culpepper, is its manner of developing a few central ideas. Like the other gospels, it has a somewhat episodic plot development in the sense of one scene constantly shifting to another. The cumulative impact of the plot is shown by experience over two thousand years to be persuasive enough to encourage readers to embrace John's vision of reality. Not that the Gospel is a mere meditation on faith - it is firmly constructed so as to gain credibility through its use of religious tradition, eyewitness testimony, authentication (by the beloved disciple) and multiple historical and geographical details. The main theme, the true identity of Jesus, is one where John may have wanted to defend himself because his Jesus is so different from the Synoptics. Culpepper's work is at its sharpest in its grasp of the dynamics of John's plot. His outlining of the workings of sequence, causality, unity and affective power show how the plot develops as Jesus' identity simultaneously comes to be recognised or misunderstood. Like a mystery story the plot thickens and gains suspense as successive characters accept or reject him. Interestingly, Culpepper shows that the intended audience, the implied readers, must have been a group of believers, because the implied reader is expected to be familiar with most of the characters and events, as well as with the generalities of Jewish festivals, though not with specific details about other aspects of life or places in ancient Israel. The central thrust of the Gospel is to distinguish between true and false faith in Jesus, to spur the readers to make their own decision.

Before dealing with the weaknesses of Culpepper's approach, I shall briefly outline a couple of major studies which are based on Culpepper's ideas. One, Irony in the Fourth Gospel by Paul D. Duke³⁰ develops an understanding of irony as a Hellenistic technique utilised by John to treat primarily Jewish areas of concern. As irony highlights the distinction between superficial and deeper areas of understanding, it facilitates a truer grasp of Jesus. John's use of irony is primarily christological in function, because it forces the readers to think on different levels, and to examine the perhaps unthought out assumptions and knowledge on which they base what they think they know. Under the heading of irony can be included metaphors, double meanings and misunderstandings, as well as ironic speech itself, all of which are well represented in this Gospel. I shall be giving plenty of examples of irony in the three case study chapters later. Of equal note is the value of irony

³⁰ Paul D. Duke, Irony in the Fourth Gospel, (1985).

in mocking those who claim to understand more than they really do, from Peter or Pilate to the Jews.

A text is a personal product. Narrative criticism is closest to redaction criticism amongst the various types of historical criticism. The nature of the implied author's real concerns can only be derived, when applying narrative criticism, from the text itself. The primary focus and generative power of those concerns needs to be given high priority. Gail O'Day³¹ took up Culpepper's work and demonstrated that the methods of Christ's revelation was John's main interest, the how rather than the what. The precise means of telling the story are heavily loaded with theological implications. Adapting ideas from Bultmann, O'Day shows how John's Jesus reveals truth whilst the contents of that truth remain often hard to pin down. One main theological claim that Jesus is the Son of God, which occurs and reoccurs several different ways by means of the narrative mode of expression is made throughout the Gospel.

Four years after the first publication of Anatomy, it was reissued with a new preface.³² Here Culpepper took issue with some of his critics - the details of which we shall come to when looking at Mark Stibbe's work - and where he outlined possible future areas of investigation. One area would be the use of communications models. In terms of philosophical background, Culpepper acknowledged his heavy dependence on the communications model of Roman Jakobson, and said some critique of that model would certainly be in order, so as to have an appreciation for how John's narrative relates to other narratives, and how in its very attempt to be distinctive it is most in dialogue with the other gospels. Another issue is the role of the narrator. Building on Culpepper's work, Jeffrey Staley had portrayed the author of the gospel as an astute narrator intent on a strategy of reader entrapment.³³ Whereas Culpepper sees the literary devices as helpful aids for the reader, Staley regards them as negative and sometimes self-contradictory. Rejecting Staley's approach, Culpepper nevertheless urged the need for further study on the arbitrary and rhetorical workings of the Gospel. There is, too, scope for deepening an understanding of time in the fourth gospel, suggests Culpepper, by looking at the significance of the distinction between Christ's own time, his 'hour', and the time of the Jewish festivals. Several future directions for looking

³¹ G. O' Day, Revelation in the Fourth Gospel, (1986).

³² Culpepper, Anatomy, (1987 edn.) p. ix-xii.

³³ J.L. Staley, The Print's First Kiss, (1988).

at plot were suggested by Culpepper, amongst them the study of the rhetorical effects of an episodic plot, and of the handling of revelation and concealment. Indeed, the latter has been partially covered by Norman Petersen's more recent book³⁴, to which I shall return later. Anatomy concentrated on a set of particular misunderstandings, rather than on the general role of misunderstanding as a part of implicit commentary, and he wishes to see that developed also. Moreover, whilst irony and other devices have been examined well, there is still a large gap in the study of the symbolism in the Fourth Gospel. His exploration of the topic of the implied reader was only a tentative first effort, and the questions now to ask are : what is the relationship between characterisation, the issues and tensions in the story, and the definition of the implied reader, and how does this gospel evolve and interact with this reader as it unfolds chapter by chapter? Lastly, on a more general level, Culpepper points out that there is still a long way to go in engaging with the issue of the balance between art and history in the text.

(ii) The Work of Mark Stibbe

This scholar is fast becoming the most prolific Johannine literary critic. He has issued a series of monographs and articles since the early 1990s. In order of publication, first came John as Storyteller,³⁵ Stibbe's doctoral thesis, which in its first part treats the theory and practice of applying practical, genre, social, and narrative historical methods to John's gospel, and then in its second part looking at these in relation to chapters 18-19 in detail. Next came John: Readings. A New Biblical Commentary,³⁶ the first ever narrative critical commentary to cover the whole Gospel. He analyses each chapter according to context, structure, form, plot type, plot, time, narrator, reader, characteristics, literary devices, and other implicit commentary, especially irony. Next came an anthology of literary perspectives on John,³⁷ a useful collection of pieces from before and after the birth of modern biblical literary criticism. Most recent is John's Gospel,³⁸ in which he updates some of

³⁴ N.R. Petersen, The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light, (1993).

³⁵ Stibbe, Storyteller, (1992).

³⁶ Stibbe, John. Readings : A New Biblical Commentary, (1993).

³⁷ M. Stibbe, The Gospel of John as Literature : An Anthology of Twentieth Century Perspectives, (1993).

³⁸ Stibbe, John's Gospel, (1994).

his earlier work, and produces five main chapters : a reader-response treatment of Jesus' characterisation as the hero; a structuralist analysis of John's plot, adopting the terminology of A.J. Greimas; an investigation of the genre of the gospel using Northrop Frye's analysis of 'mythoi' or 'plot types'; a narrative critical survey of the style of the gospel concentrating on chapter 11; and, using one of the newest literary methods, the ethics of reception, he looks at the use of satire and especially polemic in John.

Stibbe has two main areas of disagreement with Culpepper's work. Firstly, he like others, criticises Culpepper for depending too much on a type of literary critical interpretation which originates in the study of the modern novel. Quite a number of scholars find this an inappropriate method for a first century narrative. For John, Stibbe and others agree, the world of ancient Jewish and Graeco-Roman narratives is the best one from which to draw the relevant interpretative criteria. Secondly, Stibbe finds fault with Culpepper's ahistorical approach. After the initial excitement of the literary critical ferment, and the rush away from historical critical methods, scholars are now settling down to a less black and white contrast between the two. A story may be primarily a story, but it may at the same time also be history, and indeed a community narrative. Narrative criticism need not negate historicity. Culpepper's literary approach stems from the New Criticism, which looked at the text alone, regardless of all external data. For instance, a Gospel is written out of a shared experience for a wider audience, and it adopts the story mode to tell history. Stibbe has thus given way a little to the idea of a text as a window, even if its mirrorlike qualities still predominate. He bases his work on a wider and deeper understanding of the historical and sociological functions of narrative, recognising that communities employ narrative as a device for enhancing social values and corporate identity; and that narrativity itself is a phenomenon which gives the shape of story to any narrative, fictional or historical, and is thus prior to those categories.

John as Storyteller, Stibbe's most weighty book takes seriously the role of Gospel narrative as a rhetorical phenomenon, which is skilfully deployed to create a specific kind of theological understanding of Jesus for its readers. Stibbe tries to identify and evaluate the narrative composition of the Gospel, especially those elements which constitute a developing story; and to demonstrate how these narrative qualities are utilised in the service of the author's particular Christology. Stibbe pursues this interest with reference to practical criticism, genre criticism, narrative history, and most importantly for

this thesis, with reference to social division, where he uses categories derived from the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of religion 'in order to show how in John's narrative Christology must not be read as a closed world but as an index of its community's value system and as a functional discourse' ³⁹. (Though there are questions as to how convincing or verifiable Stibbe's functionalism is - how far can you read off the needs of the community from the way the story is told ?). In chapter 7 Stibbe develops this in his treatment of John 18-19, demonstrating how John as storyteller creates an imaginative framework in a personal, pastoral and psychological way, that gives the Johannine community a sense of coming home to its true self, and fulfilling its destiny after such a time of alienation. Stibbe concludes by reiterating his hope that he has provided, firstly, an integrative hermeneutics which comments on literary factors without excluding historical, social and psychological dimensions; and secondly treated fairly the four elements of literature : the original world of the author, the author, the text and the reader. He gives emphasis to the role of author, at least insofar as John is a masterful storyteller. Nevertheless, there is still further work to be done, and Stibbe suggests that the revelatory function of the narrative form should be a rich mine for exploration, and especially the question: 'If John's story is revelatory, then how much of that sense of disclosure is due to John's exploration of the narrative form?'⁴⁰

Whatever the current literary stature of the text, John's intention is not to create a great piece of literature per se. Like any human mind, which can unconsciously impose order on experience, he may well not have been aware of all the patterns he was creating or all the devices he was employing. For that matter, neither does the reader need to comprehend all the patterns, balance and symmetry in the text in order to appreciate their effect. All of the techniques available to John were and are available to other narrators, and so they are not unique. John's style comes from a mixture of his own creative talent, from tradition, and from his cultural surroundings.

Since narrative criticism approaches the writer's thought through the medium of story, it offers a promising method of combining a conceptual and a literary analysis of John's main theme. Further investigation is needed to see how suitable the categories of narrative criticism are for teasing out the subtleties of the persons and patterns of faith in this gospel. The theme does

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Stibbe, *Storyteller*, p.199.

not directly drive the plot but acts as a constant commentary on the action. Also, whilst we should appreciate the story as a whole, it is only possible to discover what John means by faith by looking at individual episodes and by analysing the smaller scenes as well as the sweep of the larger narrative.

7. Literary Criticism and the Johannine Community

It is easy to slip into quite individualistic terminology when discussing issues of believing and knowing. However, the Gospel of John does not offer a privatised religion; it offers the experience of a truth-seeking journey, along a road peopled with the presence of other seekers, past and present and future. At the Last Supper, Jesus patiently teaches the disciples about the relationships which they have not yet perceived. He seeks to build up an abiding community of faith which will survive his bodily departure and yet extend his glory. Jesus tells them that they are seeing and knowing the Father in him. However, he has had to begin by exposing their ignorance and their fears. Several times a single disciple replies to Jesus in the first person plural (e.g. 14.5,8), suggesting the communitarian nature of the truth-seeking process. Jesus, though, tends to reply to the disciple using the singular 'you', indicating the continued need for personal experience of the truth. The interplay between personal and communal aspects of truth-seeking can also be seen in Mary Magdalene's behaviour at the empty tomb in chapter 20. Her first reaction, as far as she is a representative character, is to speak for herself and her community. "They have taken away the Lord from the tomb, and we do not know where they put him". With a very human mixture of faith and doubt she addresses the gardener, discovers that he is her Lord, shows her commitment and faith, but simultaneously, rather than celebrating a victory over death, she laments a missing body. But a few verses later (20.13), she is no longer speaking in the plural. Her response to the two angels replaces "the Lord" with "My Lord", and "we have not known" with "I have not known". Ironically, she is feeling alone in a situation which was intended to assure her of the knowledge that she would never be alone again. The strength of the community's faith does not guarantee the strength of the individual's faith, and there is room for personal appropriation. Jesus' words - as in chapter 16 - will only really make sense in the light of experience, and that experience will involve both mutual love strengthened by joy and persecution, and moments of isolation on the journey of faith.

The way in which the promise of the Holy Spirit is introduced in the Farewell Discourses highlights an essential feature of post-resurrection faith and knowledge. Jesus promises a new paraclete, and indeed in some sense his own renewed presence. The world will not have these sightings, but the disciples will 'know' the paraclete and 'see' Jesus. As he shifts from the paraclete to himself, there is also a shift in the temporal aspects of faith. The disciples know the paraclete, and have him now, but Jesus they "will see". For the first time (of only three times) John uses the expression 'in that day' (14.20). In the Old Testament, the term is used many times for the moment of God's powerful actions, for better or worse, in Israel. In this gospel it carries the meaning of the moment of the definitive understanding of Jesus' life and message, when "you will know that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you". At this point Jesus for the first time reveals to the disciples that their relationship to him is intimately connected with that of Jesus with his Father. This assurance is given collectively, not individually. Jesus is 'in' the Johannine community. Both in their true nature, and in their daily lives, those who believe in Jesus are empowered to do what Jesus does and be where Jesus is. All the statements in this key passage, 14 : 15-20, are addressed to a collective 'you'.

The "you" so addressed is / are a social and political community. There are strong political and social aspects to the community nature of this gospel. There are a large number of widely varying sociological analyses of John available, which cannot be covered comprehensively here. But the connections between the search for truth and a believer's place in the world have been well explored by David Rensberger, in his book, Overcoming the World : Politics and Community in the Gospel of John.⁴¹ Recognising that John was written in an atmosphere of conflict and persecution, with all the stresses of loyalty to one social group in a complex struggle, Rensberger maintains that John refuses to restrict that struggle to one geographical, historical and social setting, but links it to the fundamental areas of how God is involved in the world, and how humans respond to God, and to one another. He explores the interconnections of spiritual and political redemption and liberation, and there is much in his work which is relevant to understanding the historical and eternal aspects of the search for truth. Beginning with an elaboration of the various sociological definitions of a sect, he shows how the Johannine community can be shown to be characterised as a sect. Amongst

⁴¹ D. Rensberger, Overcoming the World : Politics and Community in the Gospel of John, (1989).

its most prominent sectarian characteristics, are its rejection of the 'world', a claim to a unique or special truth, voluntary membership based on special religious experience or knowledge, and the vitality of love and mutual acceptance within the group. The extremity of the persecution they suffered meant that 'Jesus became the centre of their new cosmos, the locus of all sacred things'.⁴² Thus the theology, and epistemology, of the gospel have radically political dimensions.

Rensberger outlines, as one of his case-studies, how chapter 3 illustrates Jesus' - and John's - response to those people on the edge of the Johannine community, the secret believers, and the disciples of John the Baptist. Both of them are called to break with their past. Nicodemus, would then have a double role - as the exemplar of one on an inner journey towards Christ, as well as the representative of his communities; of the Pharisees, and of those who believe securely. To tell the truth is to live dangerously, and to risk death. There is no such thing as an apolitical epistemology or belief system. Somewhere there will be truth-claims and power groupings in conflict.

John's gospel reflects the division between those who recognise the truth and those who reject it. It is only by knowing the truth that the world can be set free from its sin. Jesus liberates by speaking and embodying truth. This truth is the reality of God, and of God's claim upon the world. Loyalty to God through Jesus subverts the activities of the world. John's Christology is the fundamental truth of John's Christianity, its foundational vision, in which the reader's understanding of God, themselves and others was grounded. One of the first steps in liberation is the liberation of consciousness, the removal of the oppressor's claim to right and authority over the lives of the oppressed, and the opening up of new possibilities. Once people have been made aware of an alternative order, they can be made free to imagine their own future. Jesus practises his authority by ceaselessly increasing people's awareness, and undermining any of their commitments to the false truths of this world. So any matters connected with truth, with faith, with knowledge, will always be intimately connected with doing, with practicalities and politics. The believing and the knowing in the Fourth Gospel do not operate in a political vacuum. A literary critical treatment is well placed to draw out these resonances within the text.

⁴² Rensberger, *Overcoming*, p. 28.

8. From Theory to Practice

The three characters I have selected are: Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the blind man. Every one of them has a conversation with Jesus which dwells in some way or other on the nature of true belief, the recognition of the truth, and the consequences of belief. These three episodes are rich with thematic connections with other parts of the gospel, its plot, themes and personalities. However, I do not wish to lose sight of how John is one coherent, progressively developing story. There are overarching patterns in the narrative as a whole, and I shall look for their expression in each discrete episode. Each shorter narrative makes its own point, whilst remaining in harmony with the whole. The next stage is to move to using three characters to explore the subject matter of knowing and believing, and to see how narrative criticism helps in this process. From a survey of these encounters I hope to draw the outlines of some conclusions about the nature of Johannine belief, using the insights of Polanyi, and revealed through narrative criticism.

Nicodemus the Pharisee

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1. Introduction
2. Literary Criticism and Nicodemus
3. Nicodemus, Time and Understanding
4. Nicodemus as a Contrast to Other Characters
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1. Introduction

Having looked at the theoretical considerations of literary criticism, and its general application to John in practice, it would be helpful to clarify my ways of approaching these issues before trying to pin down the role of the first character I shall look at in detail : Nicodemus. This is the first detailed conversation of Jesus' in the gospel. It is also his most high profile encounter with a member of the Jewish establishment. This is a chance for Jesus to proclaim the truth he teaches to a representative of the Jewish faith whilst at the same time moving beyond the bounds of that faith. What is said , and how it is said, implicitly or explicitly, is of the greatest importance here. In the last chapter I quoted Stibbe's remark, to the effect that, if people experience the gospel as a revelatory story, how far can that be attributed to John's skilful use of the narrative form? To frame the question in the sphere of faith responses and characterisation, if the reading of the Nicodemus element in the story tells us something, then how far is that due to John's skilful use of characterisation and / or other literary devices? So compressed is this narrative, that it is often difficult to disentangle the themes and devices , and to work out how much weight is borne by any one technique. Furthermore, if we use the phrase 'faith response' to serve as a catch-all for any instances of characters coming to faith in the gospel, how far can we expect to see details of, or indeed any, progression in those characters who appear so infrequently, or even only once?

Given that the density of this narrative and the elusiveness of the main theme are welded together in John's story, any treatment of any episode,

character or setting must surely be kaleidoscopic in its approach. On one level, our expectations of characterisation in John - as set out in chapters 1 and 2 - may be as follows : Each character will have a message for us. Most will be involved in a faith quest in some way or other, will enter the fray, and in the heat of the conflict, their true nature and their capacity for belief or unbelief will become apparent. Each one will find something revealed for himself, whether or not he accepts it. Each will be confronted by an aspect of Jesus that can enrich both the character's and the reader's understanding of Christ.

For those who accept Culpepper's analysis of the plot, the challenge is to isolate how a story whose main character is said to be static, and whose attendant characters are largely foils, can reveal anything, when that main character is as elusive as Stibbe suggests. How can those minor characters, who, according to some literary critics, exist only to complement the chief protagonist, and to search, for him often vainly, possibly imprint themselves on the reader's consciousness as convincing flesh and blood characters? Every character is in the shadow of Jesus Christ, and John must draw them out of the shadows and engender the feeling of a genuine encounter. Remembering the existentialist theology that says, rather hyperbolically, that Christ reveals nothing except that he is the Revealer, what sort of content can we expect in these encounters? Might perhaps the author reveal less in the way of content and more in the way of the faith experience itself? If Jesus speaks of what he has seen without giving the details, and yet still draws people of faith towards him, could John entice the reader to faith in a similar manner? Might it be expected, then that each character will not increase our knowledge of the content of faith, but will deepen our awareness of the varied approaches to faith, so that each character becomes a way to the Way, the Truth and the Life? A deep irony is that the characters, of course, have their origin in the Logos (as do all people, as the Prologue tells us). What sort of pattern of faith development does this imply? Could it be that the encounter for some will then be about grasping the meaning of what we already know, rather than acquiring knowledge? On the other hand the motif of misunderstanding suggests many will be unable to find and know, as it were, the place of their origins. That may well be the key to the kind of faith development outlined here. The narrator must utilise the humanity of the minor characters in the same way that he utilises the humanity of Jesus. This is, after all, often considered the most personal of the gospels in its characterisation of

Christ, as well as of the full range of characters. Taking further what we have said about the mirrorlike qualities of the text, we can reflect on whether characterisation might be expected to be the chief burden bearer in the role of making the reader feel a part of the story.

If the foregoing is accepted as a brief glance at the territory to be covered, the following questions would pin down the concerns to be raised when examining Nicodemus:

What do we learn about Nicodemus?

What is added to our existing knowledge of Jesus?

How has Nicodemus been used as a foil for Christ's personality?

Does this episode, a microcosm of the gospel like any other, link particularly strongly with any other episodes?

What do we learn from Nicodemus about faith development?

Is this new? How is it developed elsewhere in the Gospel?

How does Nicodemus contrast with other characters?

2. Literary Criticism and Nicodemus

(1) The Literary Critics

Usually, Nicodemus is seen as a representative of those leading Jews who cannot come to full faith in Jesus. His horizons are limited to earthly realities, and Jesus does not fit into his categories. His knowledge of scripture is impeccable, yet his understanding of it is inadequate. The author frequently uses the device of misunderstanding to draw out the challenge of faith, and Nicodemus has been seen as the embodiment of misunderstanding. Nicodemus has enough belief to trust Jesus' signs, but not to move on from there. So what difference does literary criticism make? What follows is a synopsis of various literary critical treatments of Nicodemus, pointing out their main insights, and then a critique on their conclusions about Nicodemus' role.

To what extent does Nicodemus become a full believer? Culpepper's brief treatment of Nicodemus leads him to conclude that Nicodemus is not far from the kingdom of God, but he remains outside. Although he at first seems to be a mere representative of those who had believed only on the basis of Jesus' signs, he quickly develops a more well-defined personality. But there have been various comments that will prejudice the reader against trusting Nicodemus, for the reader has seen and does see more than Nicodemus. Unable to fit Jesus into his own prior assumptions about the Messiah,

Nicodemus is on the brink of faith, but unable to make the transition. In terms of the affective power of this episode, 'there is the pathos of age meeting youth, established religion meeting an emerging pneumatic movement, tradition confronting freedom'.⁴³

The mention of the creation of the individual, the means of earthly and heavenly birth, takes us back to the creation spoken of in the prologue. The lucid exegesis by Servotte notes the connection between verses 11- 21 of chapter 3 and the prologue.⁴⁴ Although there is debate as to whose words these are, and whether Nicodemus is still present to hear them, at least it does seem that the Nicodemus episode has rendered this confession of faith possible, and this is directly related to it. Servotte's most perceptive comment, though occurs in his appendix on the structure of the story, the indications of time, and the narrative point of view. His analysis of this reveals

'the co-existence within the Gospel of two attitudes to time. On the one hand, there is an awareness of the historical situation and also the progression of faith, but on the other hand, there is also the certainty of an eternal truth which is always present. That has deep repercussions on our understanding of the Gospel, for it can lead to two readings. One could, for example, read the story of Nicodemus as one of the stages in Christ's self-revelation: but one could also read it as a typical instance of the relation between man and Christ. The historical reading, which locates this moment in time, offers one interpretation, the typological one another. They need not be mutually exclusive'.⁴⁵

So perhaps we need to analyse each character not just in terms of events, time and plot, but also in terms of the historical encounter with Jesus and the universal encounter with the Christ. What connection is there between the particular historical acts of faith and trust in Jesus as recorded in the Gospel, and the demands and experience of faith for those who have never met the saviour in the flesh?

The narrator's reticence about Nicodemus has led some to see this dialogue, and indeed Nicodemus' role, as a study in incomprehension. In his commentary, Stibbe shows how very dense in chapter 3 are the many themes mentioned. He counts fourteen (listed in more detail in this chapter in

⁴³ Culpepper, Anatomy, p. 135.

⁴⁴ H. Servotte, According to John, London, 1994.

⁴⁵ Servotte, John, p.104. (See the comments on X. Leon-Dufour's article later in this chapter)

section 2).⁴⁶ The character of Jesus, against whom the character of Nicodemus is defined, is shown as the :

'revealer of heaven's secrets... he discloses truth about the elusiveness of the Spirit by comparing the Spirit with the desert wind. He indirectly communicates the fact that he has unrestricted access to and from heaven, and that he is the Son of Man, the one whose lifting up will give eternal life to all those who behold him in faith. In speaking of these things, however, Jesus proves to be the elusive Christ, a concealing revealer. He speaks in puns, double entendres and metaphors which require more than a modicum of wit to interpret. He also uses discontinuous dialogue by transcending the level of discourse used by his questioner'.⁴⁷

Against this Nicodemus is the embodiment of misunderstanding. John's use of literary devices is particularly well demonstrated in this chapter. There are puns, like spirit / wind and lift up / sacrifice. There is double entendre, especially with 'again' / 'from above'. Most of all, there is parody, in which Nicodemus' pretensions to power and knowledge are skilfully utilised by Jesus to mock Nicodemus' failure to believe. The echoes with the prologue in 3:16-21, the section sometimes called John's kerygma, provide the focus for the characterisation of God, whose prime characteristic here is a self-giving love expressed in action, given to the world despite its hostility. Whilst Nicodemus' incomprehension sounds a warning note, God's love and generosity are reiterated. The choice is plain, the consequences are clear, and the invitation to the light always open.

In regard to 7: 45-52 Stibbe notes that, as the conflict increases in intensity, the pace of the narrative slows down.⁴⁸ Nicodemus only ever appears in Jerusalem, and here his reappearance brings echoes from the preceding verses about the Spirit glorifying Christ, and the water rituals associated with the feast of tabernacles relate to his own concern with rebirth in his previous conversation. Whilst his behaviour in this episode shows him still to be a secretive enquirer, he does not come too badly out of it. As Stibbe says, 'the reader is certainly meant to view Nicodemus as the best of a bad bunch'. He is the only character in the chapter (apart from Jesus) who

⁴⁶ Stibbe, John, p.49-61.

⁴⁷ Stibbe, John, p. 55.

⁴⁸ Stibbe, John, p. 89.

elicits any support from the reader'.⁴⁹

The effect of Nicodemus' uncertainty may be to move the reader to seeking certainty. In his synchronic reading of the narrative, Moloney approaches chapters 1 - 4 as an implied reader would encounter them.⁵⁰ He notes how Nicodemus makes a favourable impression on the reader by at least moving from darkness to the light, and how the reader's sympathy for him is strengthened by his repeated efforts to understand Jesus. Moloney is particularly good on showing how the traditional understanding of the phrase 'the kingdom of God' is shifted towards the notion of a community of believers joined through eternal life, into whose companionship one is initiated by a liminal experience, involving both water and spirit. The events leading to faith are transcendent, and faith is an entity or experience shared and experienced with others. The Nicodemus episode as a whole has premonitions of things to come, for although there have been comments about the conflict between Jesus and the Jews, the end is still unknown to the implied reader. God's act of love in sending his Son raises the fundamental question for all people, of whether or not to accept the revelation. Nicodemus' prevarication forces the reader to prefer decisiveness. When the time is always the present moment, it is the response of the believer which is significant, rather than any further action by the God whose primary action has been to send his Son. Moloney believes that Nicodemus is used as a model of partial faith, who makes his own journey into faith, but that is only apparent by chapter 19.

It seems that the data can be read, and will continue to be read, in a variety of ways. Probably the most penetrating analysis of Nicodemus comes from Jouette Bassler.⁵¹ She points out that the data for deciding whether Nicodemus can be placed on one side or the other of authentic faith can be read and organised in conflicting ways. The fact that he keeps returning to Jesus seems to counter-balance his repeated failures to understand. His defence of Jesus on a legal technicality, which seems a minimal effort on one level, is at least an act of risk-taking. His respect for the body of Jesus, whilst perhaps an act of unbelief in the promise of the resurrection, can also be seen as more courageous than the disciples behind closed doors. Bassler notes the essential ambiguity in everything connected with Nicodemus, and especially

⁴⁹ Stibbe, John, p. 94.

⁵⁰ F.J. Moloney, Belief in the Word, (1993), p.104-121.

⁵¹ J.Bassler, Mixed Signals ; Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel, JBL, 108/4, 1989, p.635-646.

how this is connected with his oscillation between two spiritual places, that of unbelief, and that of the encounter with Christ. What is missing is any conclusive comment in the gospel about Nicodemus, an absence which many commentators have tried to explain away, rather than leave unresolved.

Using the forms of reader-response criticism developed by Wolfgang Iser, Bassler suggests that Nicodemus works as a character precisely because he is ambiguous. 'Since the text provides no definitive closure to the figure, the reader must bring closure beyond the text, but this is not an easy process. Nicodemus creates a cognitive 'gap' in the text that the reader must fill, and in the process of filling this gap, the reader is confronted with some serious questions'.⁵² The ambiguity of Nicodemus makes him a more attractive figure and deepens the nature of his portrayal. Turning to the categories of social anthropology, Bassler finds it very useful to adapt the category of marginality, for those who are members of two or more groupings. A marginal character is one who does not have a certain location or destination, someone hovering on the point of a transition, with no sign of the conflict being resolved. In contrast to the disciples who have been reborn, Nicodemus still seems to be on the margins.

To put it in terms of Polanyian thought, Nicodemus is someone who finds it troublesome to operate outside the rules of the tradition. He seems to need the framework of authority, and will not take responsibility for stepping outside that framework. He prefers to stick to the knowledge that is inherited, rather than the knowledge that is newly experienced. But even though the rules are being broken, it seems to him, he is drawn to discover more. By chapter 11, he is in league with others in the society of explorers seeking the truth. In his conversation concerning rebirth, he comes close to the issue of boundary conditions, of the point at which higher level explanations are needed to explain lower level events. Jesus is urging him to move out into wider frames of reference. The thought that occurs to him of a man re-entering his mother's womb is a point at which he is struggling with the fusion of incompatibles, a point at which Polanyi sees revelation may occur. If he can let go of his old maps, and make a new one, he will take the risk necessary to faith.

Taken as a whole, the direction taken by literary critics is one of looking more closely at the connection between Nicodemus' response to Jesus, and the readers' responses to Nicodemus' journey of faith. What narrative criticism

⁵² Bassler, *Mixed Signals*, p.644.

and some of the other schools of thought are good at doing is isolating the means by which John evokes Nicodemus' journey taking place, and the corresponding readers' journey; what they do not do is give us a vocabulary with which to characterise the nature and stages of that journey. After a close examination of the texts, I shall look at one of the underlying issues already raised here : how believing is connected with a sense of living in more than just historical time.

(2) The Texts

(a) 2: 23 - 3. 21

Often the narrator uses passages to serve as the endings of one episode and the introduction to another episode. This is the status of 2 : 23 - 25. Nicodemus' introduction is the conclusion to the Temple dialogue. A clutch of words and phrases densely packed together in verses 23 - 25 are set to trigger the reader's memory in the next section. The incompleteness of a signs- based faith is signalled by the narrator's mention of the many who believe only on the basis of signs, and whom Jesus does not consider worthy of trust. Jesus' complete penetrative insight into human nature is stressed by John, for the first time in the gospel, and the next encounter will be the first test of this explicit remark. Nicodemus' heart and soul and mind will be the first man in this gospel to come before the revealing light of Christ's presence. The way in which 'he knew what was in man' in 2: 25 is connected with 'a man of the Pharisees' in 3: 1 are juxtaposed points to Nicodemus as one of those whom Jesus knows and does not need witness from. Stibbe points out that John's technique of using passages to close and open simultaneously is an integral part of John's realised eschatology, his evocation of the Jesus whose presence is the final word, and to which response is required here and now.⁵³ The dramatic impetus is thus set for a tantalising encounter with one who has a signs-based faith, and could be on the verge of something more.

The structure of the passage is carefully arranged. The architecture of the dialogue on truth and insight in vv. 1-15 is arranged in a tripartite structure. Three questions are followed by three answers . One who is 'a man' asks the questions, the other answers as 'the Son of Man'. By the device of inclusion the vocabulary and thought structures of the passage are closely

⁵³ Stibbe, John , p.53.

interwoven. Vv. 1 and 2 mention 'a man', 'coming to Jesus', 'by night', 'doing', and 'God is with him'. Vv. 19-21 echo these with 'men', 'coming to the light', 'darkness', 'doing', 'wrought in God'.

The characterisation of the individual and the group here is consistent with John's other characterisation of belief and unbelief. John has already used the phrases about 'coming to Jesus' as a synonym for faith at the end of chapter 1, during the gathering of the disciples. Nicodemus' initial appearance in this sense bodes well. But overall there are darker overtones. Labelled as a Pharisee, as a leader of the Jews, Nicodemus is thus associated with those groups with whom Christ has already had some conflict. Nicodemus asserts his role as a group representative by the use of a first person plural 'we', and also thus gives away the clue to where he finds his main sense of authority and certainty. Above all, the meeting at night is one which evokes an atmosphere of darkness and therefore blindness (like, for instance the movements of Judas at night in chapter 13).

Nicodemus' confession of faith is one which shows him up to be a man of fairly cut-and-dried opinions, who tries to use pre-set categories whatever he comes across, rather than relate to it as it is, to the fullness and complexity of whatever presents itself. There is no difference for him in the way Jesus is from God to the way John the Baptist is from God. He does not understand the full import of Jesus being 'from God', of 'God being with him', of a 'birth from above', or the nature of the Spirit. The one who is the teacher of Israel is at one level an historical representative of his own believing / half-believing people, as well as being one who is stuck on a certain point in his faith-quest.

The character of Jesus is further shown to be one who opens up the nature of the heavenly world, eternal life, by evoking the manner of its operation. No concrete details are given - but experiences like rebirth in water or the Spirit, listening to the wind, and so forth are hints and pointers to the life he speaks of. His unlimited ability to disclose the truth does not manifest itself as a detailed inventory of the contents of heaven. Jesus' vocabulary, full of irony, metaphors, puns and double meanings serves to convey the sense of the unsettling yet alluring nature of the heavenly secrets.

How Jesus is given this role depends on the author's deployment of the narrator's point of view and of other points of view. As Nicodemus seems to fade into the background, without even a curtain call, the distinction between Jesus' voice and the narrator's voice becomes indistinct. Whether vv. 16-21

belong to the former or the latter is a matter of much contention in historical-critical debate. But from a literary point of view, these verses, with their glance forward towards the passion in v. 16, secure a vantage point for the reader over the varied events in the course of the gospel, and enable not just a post-resurrection perspective on Jesus' earthly life, but also move the reader back into the narrator's embrace, to the one who sees things *sub specie aeternitate*.

As he has revealed more about the Spirit, so then Jesus reveals more about himself, and then in the succeeding verses more is revealed about the Father. The connection between belief and eternal life is re-emphasised. The out-pouring of God's love manifests itself in presenting Jesus as the one in whom to believe, and the intensity of the love is that none should perish. In all other cases in this gospel God's love is for the disciples - this is the only case where it is for the world. The passage implies the possibility of belief for all, whilst hinting at a variety of responses from full acceptance to total rejection. Truth is something which can be, and should be, done, and doing it brings people to the light. The opposite of doing the truth is doing evil. These verses, then, serve to extend John's portraits of God and humanity, and so to characterise the chief participants in the drama of salvation.

The mood is set by the use of a number of literary devices. The whole dialogue is coloured by the mild use of parody by Jesus. Jesus continually adapts Nicodemus' language, and throws it back at him with very different connotations, which Nicodemus does not grasp. This is most evident in the claims about the teacher, and true and false claims to knowledge. The most obvious double meaning is the word *anōthen* which bears variously the meanings of 'from above', and 'again'. Jesus intends both meanings, but Nicodemus understands only the latter. There are also puns, like *pneuma*, which can mean wind or spirit, and *hypsōō*, which at the spiritual level has overtones of glorification, but at the physical level connotes being hauled up.

Stibbe lists 14 themes which are characteristic of the whole gospel and which are included in this passage.⁵⁴ This is an abridged version of his list :

- (i) Coming to Jesus
- (ii) The conflict of light and darkness
- (iii) The difference between false and true claims to knowledge
- (iv) the real origins of Jesus
- (v) the role of signs in evoking faith

⁵⁴ Stibbe, *John*, p.55.

- (vi) the place of being born again in the life of a believer
- (vii) the importance of seeing God's rule and of testifying to it
- (viii) the reference to water, (generally taken to be already referring to an already existing Christian initiation rite)
- (ix) the Spirit , which is predominantly characterised by its elusiveness
- (x) the reference to testimony furthers the courtroom atmosphere
- (xi) ascent and descent, mentioned in chapter 1 with reference to the angels, are now related to the Son of Man himself.
- (xii) the lifting up of the Son, looking backward to Moses and forwards to Calvary
- (xiii) eternal life is linked directly with Jesus' mission
- (xiv) believing is mentioned as the route to eternal life.

The dialogue on rebirth opens with Nicodemus speaking as a representative figure, in the first person plural, offering Jesus a witness based on signs, which Jesus does not fully trust. He gives Nicodemus a straight challenge, to be born again, or miss out on seeing the reign of God altogether. The use of double meaning - above / again - forces Nicodemus to think. He pursues a literalist and individualist interpretation of Jesus' words, enquiring after the possibilities of physical rebirth for the individual. The double entendre of *pneuma* - wind or spirit - further throws Nicodemus off balance. Nicodemus the representative is issued with the injunction, "You must all be born again", hinting at the collective nature of the faith-commitment Jesus asks for. The communal element of discipleship is acutely painful for Nicodemus, who has come by night, and will continue to act as a secret believer. Jesus says Nicodemus is astonished - a comment revealing Nicodemus' personal human reaction as well as his threatened status as a capable teacher of Israel. Nicodemus had recognised Jesus as a teacher from God, Jesus calls Nicodemus a teacher of Israel, and it is hard to tell whether this is dismissive or not.

Echoing the prologue, v. 11 identifies the light with the Johannine community. "We speak, and to what we have seen we bear witness, and you all do not receive our witness". Verse 12 makes explicit the antagonisms already emerging in the struggle between flesh and Spirit. Rather than a rigid Gnostic dualism, John seems to be hinting at two life orientations, one content with the surface of life, one reaching deeper.

Vv. 12-21 are linked by stair-step progression, in which one thematic word from one verse is linked with one word in the next verse, which adds a new thematic word to link it with the next verse. The link between heaven and earth established through Jesus in these verses serves to authenticate Jesus' authority and teaching. That link is reinforced through the lifting up, because an intertextual reference to the Old Testament would bring memories of how the lifting up of the serpent on the pole in the time of Moses brought to an end sin, and made belief possible. The accent is on glory, on the positive, healing elements of the crucifixion, rather than on the evil of those who bring it about. So the reader is drawn to the open, freely - given and voluntary nature of the love of God, in which belief is invited. Belief has life or death consequences, associating attitudes and actions as the sign of faith for individuals and groups. Is Nicodemus now on the rack, torn between his public position and his emerging secret faith?

By the end of chapter 2, the implied reader is already close to discovering the connections between receiving and believing, that 'relational quality of true faith', as Moloney says.⁵⁵ The narrative has slowed its pace at this point, allowing the narrative to address the reader directly, and invite the reader into his confidence again just before the crucial encounter to follow. All around there is movement towards Jesus, and the reader is invited to a privileged overview of the true motivations and results of such movements.

The reader will be attracted initially to Nicodemus, as he moves from darkness to light, and seeks to question Jesus. Through Nicodemus' repeated misunderstandings, the reader is led to look out for the signals of deeper meanings in Jesus' other conversations. Nicodemus' failure to consider things outside his own knowledge and experience is a warning to the reader which will frame other characters' encounters and conversations with the Christ. Verses 18-19 bring the first appearance of the Johannine expressions *krinein* and *krisis*. The Nicodemus episode is concluded with this call to decision, in the light of God's judgment. According to Moloney, 'Neither God nor the Son acts as a judge... Johannine realised eschatology stresses the importance of the believer, not the sovereign action of God'.⁵⁶ Nicodemus does not reject Jesus, but at this stage the implied reader is left with the impression of his incomplete faith.

⁵⁵ F. J. Moloney, *Belief*, p.104.

⁵⁶ Moloney, *Belief*, p.119.

(b) 7 : 45 - 52

Nicodemus' second appearance occurs whilst Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles, after the completion of the Cana - to - Cana cycle of his journeyings. All the events in chapter 7 take place around this feast. Throughout this, in all his conversations, Jesus is engaged in both disclosure and concealment. This tension dominates his time in Jerusalem. The references to the feasts show how the narrator is slowing down process time as the conflict increases in intensity, and opposition to Jesus becomes high-level and public. Since Nicodemus appeared in chapter 2, more than a year has elapsed. In contrast, chapters 7 - 10 cover only a few months. The ring composition of chapter 7 links the Nicodemus section - v. 45-52 - with vv. 1 - 15, in which Jesus' movements in Galilee enable him to elude the authorities. This ring composition, or *inclusio*, patterns associated thoughts and words. Stibbe suggests this pattern⁵⁷ : in vv.1 - 13 Jesus evades the authorities, and does it again in vv.45 - 52; in vv. 14 - 24, 25 - 36, and 37 - 44 he participates in three separate dialogues at different stages of the feast. These verses are connected by several themes : the search of the Jewish authorities for Jesus; the mention of Galilee; the theme of deception; and the use of the phrase, 'believing in him'. The last verses of the chapter echo the Galilean reference. Stibbe points out that this chapter does not just reinforce Christ's elusiveness: 'in the present tense of the narrative world, he also proves elusive in relation to its past and future'.⁵⁸ Every one of the social groups appearing in this chapter fails to discover Jesus' past origins. As with Nicodemus last appearances, we are back to the question of origins. The major themes of chapter 7 echo those of chapter 3 : believing , knowing, coming to Jesus, water, the Spirit, sending, truth, signs.

Nicodemus takes his place alongside five different groups in this chapter - Jesus' brothers, the Jerusalem crowds, the Jews, the Pharisees and chief priests, and the Temple guards. Nicodemus is here apparently in conflict with his fellow Pharisees, and their accusations put him on the same side as Jesus. Nicodemus' conflict with his own kind puts his own misunderstanding in an altogether different category. It seems to make him much closer to Jesus. In verse 15, the Jews are questioning Jesus' authority to teach, showing doubts which Nicodemus did not have in chapter 3. At this point Nicodemus' characterisation becomes markedly more positive, especially in

⁵⁷ Stibbe, John, p.90.

⁵⁸ Stibbe, John, p.91.

his defence of the need to observe the proprieties of the law. Even if he does not openly declare himself for Jesus, the concern for the proper workings of justice marks him out as one who would give Jesus a fair hearing.

Stibbe's analysis of the plot in terms of Greimas' actantial analysis shows that an important transition in the plot structure takes place here.⁵⁹ The increase in the plots against Jesus serve to redefine the positive and negative associations of those around him, and Nicodemus emerges as one of those who, through opposing the Pharisees, comes closer alongside Jesus. There are many in this chapter who are seeking Jesus, but Nicodemus is the only one seeking him for reasons of genuine enlightenment.

As the Pharisees take charge of the situation, and put their trust in the conventional understanding of the tradition of Moses, the narrator draws us to notice Nicodemus' presence. But the opening description 'one of them' leaves it very unclear which group he is meant to belong to, whether to the Pharisees who believe in him, or to the multitudes who are said to accept Jesus. His advocacy of the proper use of the law does not extend to questioning the genuine or otherwise underpinnings of the system of law and order. The balance of Nicodemus' main interests lies in observing the law, rather than moving beyond to any personal testimony on behalf of Jesus. Bringing upon himself the sarcasm of the Pharisees, Nicodemus finds himself condemned again, and for the second time disappears for a time.

Just as 2 : 23 - 25 colours Nicodemus' first appearance, so 7 : 12 - 13 colours his second appearance. Amongst the divisions caused by Jesus, Nicodemus emerges as one who springs to his defence. As Jesus says in 7:17, those who do God's will know whether he is teaching from god or from his own authority, which would put Nicodemus in a good light. However, these positive readings are overshadowed by other indications. The words of defence and accusation are both labelled as 'muttering', which does not convey a sense of a frank confession of faith from Nicodemus. In echoing Jesus, who in v.24 said, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment", Nicodemus, saying, "does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" shows his desire to maintain the proper concerns of the law, but does not display any faith. By the end of his second appearance, the reader is still uncertain about Nicodemus. Nonetheless, he does show a very human characteristic and failing, that of timidity.

⁵⁹ Stibbe, John, p.94.

(c)19 : 38-42

The last scenes of the gospel provide us with a variety of responses from a fair number of characters to Jesus' death and of their understanding of its meaning. We come full circle with Nicodemus. He, to whom the glorification is revealed in chapter 3 is present at the burial, though to what extent he understands it is left unstated. This, the third and last of Nicodemus' appearances, is the one where the sense of time is most acute. After the end of the barrier time-shape⁶⁰ (a notation of the prescribed time limit within which the hero's task has to be completed) the hour has come.⁶¹ Now process time-shapes (indications of the passing of time), in the form of reference to the festivals, and retrospective time-shapes (reminders of earlier events in the story), show how events have unfolded purposefully to this point, and include Nicodemus' reappearances. As he did in chapter 3, so the narrator does in 19. 35, linking the Jesus of history with the Christ of faith. But Nicodemus' final act remains ambiguous : is it a recognition of Christ's true nature, or simply a lament for a lost leader ?

Nicodemus appears almost as an aide to Joseph of Arimathea in this third appearance. It would have needed more than one person to carry both Jesus' corpse and a hundred pounds of spices! A man of Joseph's status could have used servants for that role - however Nicodemus becomes involved. Maybe the presence of a Pharisee guaranteed the correctness of the burial ritual. Joseph is labelled more positively than Nicodemus, as a disciple of Jesus, but he shares Nicodemus' secrecy, 'for fear of the Jews'. On the most negative reading, this puts them both on a par with the description of secret disciples in 12: 42-43 ('for they valued human reputation rather than the honour which comes from God'). On the other hand, they would have had to ask publicly for the body of Jesus. And the behaviour of the other disciples after the crucifixion was much like Joseph's and Nicodemus' behaviour before it - they hid behind closed doors. And, if it is an extravagant attempt to prevent the body from decay, is that not a misunderstanding consonant with Peter and the beloved disciple, who also failed to grasp the meaning of resurrection until Jesus appeared to them?

How far can we take the contrast between Nicodemus and Joseph of

⁶⁰ The technical terms here are further explained in, Stibbe, John, p.15.

⁶¹ Stibbe, John , p.195.

Arimathea? They shared in the boldness of taking Christ down from the cross, and taking him to his grave (although John, unlike the Synoptics, does not say that this was by night). How much more had Joseph done to be counted as a disciple ?

It just so happened that there was a new tomb in the garden - it does not appear to have been dug especially for Joseph. How much would those two have realised it was to be a new tomb in other ways too ?

In Mark 15. 43, Joseph plucks up courage to ask for Jesus' body. It's his burst of courage, breaking free from his timidity, which seems to mark him out from Nicodemus. In fact, they are hurrying to bury him before the sabbath, which will, they do not realise, be the last of the old creation and the first of the new creation. The Nicodemus who has such a liminal role is presiding over the burial rites of the old order. All the details about the burial are noted specially - and yet it's to prove the least successful burial ever!

(d) Overview

The problem with dealing with the three segments individually is that we lose a sense of the coherence of John's narrative strategy, and his rhetorical deployment of Nicodemus with regard to his theme. At the end of chapter 2 the implied author asserts his authority as a witness by utilising his knowledge of scripture and his post - resurrection perspective. Impressing the implied reader with these credentials, he makes explicit the hints he has been making about the deeper meaning of Jesus' remarks, and the difficulties people had in following him (in all senses). Having explained Jesus' double meaning of v. 19 in v. 21, and displayed the varied implications of *pisteuin* in vv. 23 and 24, he has put the implied reader in a good position to appreciate a knowing eavesdropping on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The implied author is training the implied reader to look for double meanings - much in the same way that Jesus is training his disciples. Nicodemus is the one on whom Jesus practises this training, and in the readers' enjoyment of being on the inside track, the author buttresses the sense of knowing with which he has been endowing the reader from the prologue onwards. In this way, the relationship between author and reader is nurtured and brought close. Staley notes that the Nicodemus conversation comes as it does after the Cana sign, where the author and reader relationship has been strained by

the reversal of expectations in vv. 3-5.⁶² Here the reader is left to work out the meaning for himself. The Cana miracle is not just a challenge to the faith of those at the wedding to trust in things unseen. It is also a challenge to the reader to trust in things unseen. It as if the author leaves the reader on his own for a little while. But the introduction to the Nicodemus episode - the end of chapter 2 - is the recommencement of the closer author / reader relationship.

The reader is presented with two patterns of clues concerning Nicodemus. One set define him by his background - from the Jews, and from the Pharisees, moving by night; and another set by his current activities - moving towards Jesus, acknowledging him, defending him, taking part in his burial rites. Jesus' reaction to Nicodemus in 3: 1 -21 lacks his encouraging stance towards Philip and Thomas in 14: 8-11, and 20: 24 - 29. Still John does not provide us with any comment as to where Nicodemus is on the scale from true believer to unbeliever.

How then does this characterisation affect the reader? The ambiguity of Nicodemus leaves it up to the reader to decide (or to choose not to decide). He compels the reader to ask questions about what faith is, especially faith as John presents it. So Nicodemus' ambiguity gives us the chance to think more precisely about the nature of faith in a way in which more cut - and - dried characterisations do not. He is living out the conflict between the old and the new - and the continuing tension marks him out from the other disciples who have got off the fence, and put their point of origin behind them.

3. Nicodemus, Time and Understanding

The Nicodemus passages address the readers as people who seek, in an integrated way, the one who is both Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ figure. Xavier Leon-Dufour, shows how Chapter 3 in particular illustrates John's use of symbolism, and how it seeks to communicate the verities of life and faith.⁶³ Leon-Dufour identifies two levels of symbolic operation. The first is 'acknowledging analogical relationship between two realities in the framework of a special cultural world', such as using bread to connote both physical nourishment and spiritual feeding. On the second level,

⁶² Staley, *First Kiss*, p.97.

⁶³ X. Leon-Dufour, *Towards a Symbolic Reading of the Fourth Gospel*, *N.T.S.* vol.27, pp. 439-455.

the interplay of different cultural milieus allows for a double symbolism. Bread, thus can be the Jewish manna from heaven, or it can be the Christian bread of the Lord's supper. Leon- Dufour suggests that these two symbolic readings can be held 'in a dialectical relationship, that is, neither one or the other should drive its opposite number from the field. The only viable reading is ...the one which, from the Christian point of view, discovers the relationship between the present reality of the spirit and the times past of Jesus of Nazareth'.⁶⁴ Noting that John seeks, in 20.31, to establish a common language between his readers and himself, Leon- Dufour says that John

'wants to establish a language which would unify his readers. That is the final aim of all authentic symbolism, to open the way to communication, to a communion through a language accepted in all its breadth..... John's is a style which invites us to believe that Jesus Christ is one and the same under successive manifestations, that of Jesus and that of the glorified Christ. Through the verb to be, faith accomplishes a symbolic operation which identifies the two manifestations of this one being'.⁶⁵

To my knowledge, Leon- Dufour is one of the few scholars (along with J.L. Martyn and J. Painter) to have addressed this issue of symbolic understanding, in this way, in the sense that the implied author addresses the implied reader in a spectrum which covers two senses of time. Most narrative critical treatments address the question of intra-textual times when considering time, symbolism and belief.

'The writer is John, who, through his choice of episodes and sayings as well as by his portrayal of the characters involved, enables the reader to discern the relationships between the two situations, the one that he experiences today, and the one that was experienced by the contemporaries of Jesus of Nazareth ... As for the 'writer of the dialogues' he presents Jesus in contact with the Jews, his contemporaries, but at the same time, he projects upon them the situations of every man who encounters Jesus'.⁶⁶

Leon- Dufour uses the first Nicodemus episode as an illustration of this, and it may be possible to integrate Leon- Dufour's critical approval with a wider narrative-critical / hermeneutical framework. Examining the discourse on rebirth, Leon-Dufour suggests that the historical critics are wrong to see two

⁶⁴ Leon-Dufour, Towards, p.440.

⁶⁵ Leon-Dufour, Towards, p.442.

⁶⁶ Leon-Dufour, Towards, p.442.

redactional steps in the writing of 3: 5, one implying rebirth through the spirit, and the next, rebirth through Baptism and the spirit . He says 'Our present text would have been written by John both in a sacramental perspective and in a non-sacramental one'. He suggests that this is feasible, and not confusing, if we adopt his idea of there being two times in revelation. In one time of revelation, Jesus reveals himself to Nicodemus; in another the Spirit speaks to the reader of the gospel. John evokes the values expressed both in pre-resurrection and post-resurrection initiation practices, drawing out all the potential significances in all their fullness. One thing works through another, and Nicodemus should be able to see that water symbolises the Spirit's rebirth as well as a public entrance into the Christian community. 'On the basis of a precise and correct understanding of symbolism in the richness of its many meanings, the reader discovers that water can sometimes symbolise the spirit, sometimes baptism, and even more, that it is and is not the one and the other according to the different moments at which it is brought into consideration'.⁶⁷

The consequence for literary criticism is that, now that literary criticism is engaging in some kind of rapprochement with more historically aware techniques of scholarship, we have here an hermeneutical approach which combines the textual and historical aspects of the narrative very neatly. One consequence for understanding the portrait of Nicodemus is to see that he is not limited by his time or place as a purely historical figure without remainder , but his outlines have been drawn so as to enable him to act as a figure who is representative of our searching. The advantage, it could be said, of Nicodemus' ambiguity, is that it raises questions for the reader ; and does not admit of ready-made solutions. The reading experience and the believing experience in the end seem to merge. Like Nicodemus, the reader has to continually seek out Jesus, and avoid disappearing back into the darkness. Jesus' elusiveness and mysteriousness continually challenge the reader, and channel his energy for searching and seeking.

4. Nicodemus as a Contrast to other Characters

John draws an incomplete and yet involving portrait of Nicodemus as he does of other characters. Yet Nicodemus' own role does, I believe, prove to

⁶⁷Leon-Dufour, Towards, p.451.

be more than simply a foil for Jesus. There are indications that Nicodemus' situation belongs to more than just his individual experience, and by extension, that he acts as a representative of - and for - certain groups of people. In the context of genuine personal encounter that marks Jesus' dealings with the Johannine characters, Nicodemus' own individuality becomes evident in a way which exceeds the role of a mere foil. There is something memorable about his equivocations and falterings, and what he is strikes us more forcibly perhaps than what he does (which is not very much - in terms of pure action, nothing he does alone serves to alter the course of the plot, merely to amplify it). Even in the lightest of brushstrokes, John has outlined a hovering and shadowy figure, whose lifelikeness is such that we can well imagine a Nicodemus outside the pages of the text.

One prime method of revealing character is by way of comparison and contrast with other characters. This method of course has its place among the other techniques of characterisation - of asides, of straightforward description, of inside views of the characters' thoughts and feelings, of irony and so forth. In this way readers are led to identify with or react against every character. Given that the 'human interest' factor is always crucial to a story's development, the dynamics between the characters can potentially be very significant. In John's gospel, however, unlike the other gospel, the minor characters rarely interact directly with one another. Jesus is the centre of all communication, exchange and interaction, at least for his followers. So the comparisons and contrasts between the various characters will be done often indirectly and implicitly.

Nicodemus' own role has particular resonance with four other characters : John the Baptist, the Samaritan woman, the blind man and Mary of Bethany.

(i) Nicodemus and John the Baptist

John the Baptist's only direct appearances in the gospel, in chapters 1 and 3, serve partly as ironic commentaries on the character and attitudes of Nicodemus. The Baptist confesses his initial failure to recognise Jesus, a confession Nicodemus never achieves. Nicodemus has been trained to see the correct procedures and proper judgments, but John the Baptist, whatever his background, can see the wood for the trees. The very place of John's ministry, by the River Jordan near the Dead Sea, contrasts immediately with the routinised, safe and secure world of Nicodemus' Jerusalem. John is more

intimately connected with Jesus than Nicodemus. As the first named character and human being in the gospel, after the Logos, his especial role is honoured as the one chosen to facilitate the revelation of Christ to Israel. Unlike Nicodemus, he of course has seen no signs, but such is his disposition towards faith that he can believe without having seen, even if he has to take his time to recognise his Lord in person. The Baptist's repetition of the phrase "I did not know him" (1.31, 1.33) entices the reader's sympathy for his role and perhaps lets Nicodemus off the hook a little - everyone needs a little time to see the truth. Nicodemus loses nothing but the chance of walking in the light. Within the context of his community, John the Baptist came to recognise his Messiah. Recognition needs prayer, study and experience - seeing Christ face to face would not necessarily do anything for those who were unwilling to take part mind, body and soul in the encounter as best they could.

John the Baptist's second appearance follows Nicodemus' first appearance. The reader will thus have the Baptist's witness already set up as a kind of standard, or rather an example, of what is humanly possible, and against which Nicodemus will inevitably be compared. As in chapter 9 with the blind man, it is Jesus who approaches the one whose faith is to be called to be public and influential. The Baptist is here allowed to echo Jesus' words to Nicodemus. As his Lord does, so does John talk of the one who has come down from heaven, of the contrast between heaven and earth, and of the witness that is rejected. He repeats Christ's message that God has sent his Son, that those who believe in him receive eternal life, and those who do not have another fate. The most obvious comparison is that baptism, the chief activity of John, is also the chief subject of the Nicodemus conversation. The meeting with Nicodemus allows Jesus to state the principles of baptism, of rebirth into everlasting life; the meeting with John the Baptist soon led to the outworkings of Jesus' message.

Viewed not just as an individual but as the representative of a group, the Baptist has a marked aspect to his role. The narrator allows the Baptist to proclaim to his followers the very message that is consistent with what the narrator has told is the Word's purpose in the incarnation. John represents, perhaps, a type of belief that is moving in the right direction, but which needs encouragement. Allowing John's disciples to articulate their discontents, the narrator can skilfully set the Baptist apart a little from his followers, and therefore contrasts with Nicodemus, who is happy to be an orthodox Jew amongst others of the same ilk, and does not outwardly pursue his faith in the

full light of day. The Baptist shows the positive potential of his group, rather than their inadequacy. The narrator does not say whether John's disciples as a whole accept his testimony (although two of his group follow Jesus), nor do they appear again in the gospel.

Nicodemus struggles with both aspects of the rebirth that constitutes baptism. Since he is not yet himself born again, he cannot understand Jesus' real identity. Apart from the heavenly rebirth, though, it is notable that he wrestles too with the outward and visible reality of the rebirth, that is, the public initiation rite. Being born again means, to many interpreters, both being born again from above and being born again, as it were, alongside one's fellows in their social and political struggles. Against all this, John the Baptist and his followers had accepted the communitarian nature of the baptismal experience, and their leader had at least accepted the provisional nature of his baptism (1. 15, 26, 31) until Jesus inaugurated baptism with the Holy Spirit.

The narrator thus draws together two people, both of whose respective understandings of Jesus are insufficient, and need deepening. Both have limits to overcome. Both to some extent represent their own faith groupings.

(ii) Nicodemus and the Blind Man

Nicodemus' loyalties to his peer group's understanding of the Law and of the scriptures hinder him in understanding the openness and freedom of God's re-creation. To Nicodemus, the circumstances of his life may have seemed to impose a regrettable but unavoidable restriction on the freedom of his spiritual pilgrimage, especially any public witness. But he was not so much a secret believer who lacked the courage, as someone who lurked in the shadows, hovering between dangerous commitment and easy safety. To Jesus, though no situation was fully predetermined - every situation bore within it the possibilities for God's glory to shine. So with the blind man. Here Jesus noticed the man whom the Pharisees, including presumably Nicodemus, passed everyday, who was always there, and yet with their blindness, they missed him - and his potential. But, whatever the causes of his blindness, the blind man had the openness and the willingness to see, and the flexibility to react with hope and gratitude. He had to face the consequences, though. His healing, his faith, brought division in a way which Nicodemus never equalled. The ripples of his conversion spread further and wider than anything Nicodemus did. His faith and the effects on his life were too much for those around him. The events exposed how little the faith of some

was, and how little their understanding of that man in the first place. When the man is taken before the Pharisees so as to obtain an expert opinion, he is before those of whom Nicodemus is a chief member. The Pharisees' attempts to understand what had happened were hampered from the start by their application of cut-and-dried scriptural and theological formulae to the fleshy fibres of everyday life.

The story of the blind man involves a role reversal of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. Nicodemus approaches Jesus; Jesus himself approaches the blind man at the end of chapter 9 (and, at least, if he does not exactly set out to find the blind man personally, nevertheless the blind man is one of the very few healings where it is Jesus who finds a person needing healing, rather than other people bringing persons to Jesus' attention). Nicodemus only makes one more recorded public appearance until the Passion; the blind man emerges into the light, both in terms of his spiritual and physical vision, and in terms of his visibility to others. Jesus seems to be absent from much of chapter 9; Nicodemus exits from his first appearance without any passing comment from the narrator in chapter 3, as Jesus continues what may have become almost a dramatic monologue. Whilst Nicodemus remains non-committal, the blind man is an attractive example of someone who makes the choice and sticks with it despite his sufferings for it. Furthermore, the relationship between Jesus and the blind man is placed on a much closer and more intimate level than the transactions between Jesus and Nicodemus. Not only is there physical contact - the rubbing of the earthed saliva on the man's eyes - but there is a common language of identity and experience. Unwittingly echoing Jesus' great "I am" declarations, the blind man speaks up for his faith commitments and experience, where Nicodemus remains silent. He is the only character in the entire gospel to be allowed to use that phrase so crucial to the building up of Christ's identity. And Jesus places himself firmly on the blind man's side. Although Jesus at first is not forthcoming in response to the disciples questions about the reason for the man's blindness, stating that it is not a problem, but false claims to knowledge are a problem. As he says in verse 41, "If you were blind you would not have been at fault, but now you say "We see", so your sin remains". The humility of not knowing is preferable to the over-eagerness of enamelled certainty.

Just as the question of freedom from sin plays a large role in the Nicodemus dialogue, so does it here, but even more so, with the blind man. As Rensberger points out, theodicy is a main theme, and Jesus' transfers the

man's blindness from a result of sin to a cause of doing the works of God.⁶⁸ The work overcomes suffering, it does not explain it. Both nouns and verbs connected with sin are to be found more closely packed into this narrative than any other part of the gospel. What the blind man grasps - what Nicodemus fails to grasp - is that one's own personal experience, should be trusted (though not in isolation) as a pointer to the truth. Asked by the Pharisees to comment on Jesus, the man replies, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know: I know only one thing, that though I was blind, now I see". The Pharisees know their presumptions; he knows his experience, which he knows from within, and he sees it for what it is in itself, rather than trying to fit it into preconceived categories.

The narrator does not seem to make any explicit, unambiguous advances in Nicodemus' faith. Nicodemus continues to come to Jesus, one way or another, but never does the narrator make any reference to any advance on Nicodemus' original confession of faith in Christ as merely a teacher sent from God. In contrast the blind man refers to Christ firstly as "the man called Jesus", secondly as a prophet, thirdly as having come from God, and fourthly as Son of Man. The blind man achieves his enlightenment through confrontation. Nicodemus avoids an explicit and public confession of his faith confrontation. At this point the blind man contrasts not just with Nicodemus, but also with the Samaritan woman and with the disciple Thomas, for those three all engage in extended personal dialogue with Jesus. But the blind man achieves truth through fighting the authorities. Those who do the most to deny and negate the blind man's life-giving experience are paradoxically those who do the most to bring him to a clear understanding of the truth.

The path to belief involves accepting positive and negative experiences along the way, and seeing both as having potential for enhancing one's potential for the truth. As the Pharisees, separated themselves so as to be better dedicated to finding truth, mistreat and separate the blind man, so they find themselves still working within the context of God's ultimate purposes, yet placing themselves outside his salvific scheme. Faith and suffering are, however, closely interlinked. It was the painful process of constantly witnessing to their provisional insights that led the Johannine community to a fuller appreciation of the truths about Jesus. The story of the blind man acts as a bolster to those who confess their faith, suffer retribution, and still bear

⁶⁸ Rensberger, Overcoming the World, p.44.

witness. It showed that the promise of a deeper connection with Christ could lead people to bear some pain with courage. By the standards of this world, both the blind man and Jesus himself can be regarded as one of a kind, as the 'blind'. Those who uphold those standards wield great power. The blind man's parents, who were afraid of the Jews, evade their parental responsibility, protecting their reputation and all too quickly shifting attention back to their son. Just as Nicodemus did not hover alone in the shadows, so too there were those who saw, those who understood, for whom public commitment was very threatening. Chapters 3 and 9 interlock on this theme of faith as an active, public, demanding way of life. Whatever the consequences for the salvation of the respective individuals, the thoroughly and unavoidably interdependent nature of Christian faith sets standards below which it is easy to fall. Faith connects with others, and no one believer is an island. No doubt the power of these passages when they were first written lay in their appeal to the experience of a community which had suffered greatly for open commitment, and yet knew how many were on the verge of joining them. One of the notes of tragedy is that of the people who 'might have been'. By contradistinction to the blind man, all the parties who do not confess their faith openly are in danger of missing their chance to share in the adventure of open commitment.

(iii) Nicodemus and the Samaritan Woman

Westcott wrote,

'The whole passage forms a striking contrast and complement to iii.1-21. The woman, the Samaritan, the sinner, is placed over against the Rabbi, the Ruler of the Jews, the Pharisee. The nature of the worship takes the place of the necessity of the new birth; yet so that either truth leads up to the other. The new birth is the condition for entrance into the Kingdom : true worship flows from Christ's gift.

There is at the same time a remarkable similarity of method in Christ's teaching in the two cases. Immediate circumstances, the wind and the water, furnished present parables, through which deeper thoughts were suggested, fitted to call out the powers and feelings of a sympathetic listener'.⁶⁹

The contrasts between the two characters have struck people long before the advent of literary criticism. But newer studies have sharpened our awareness of what exactly these contrasts are.

To a certain extent, of course, Nicodemus is a foil for Jesus. But it should be clear by now that his role extends beyond that. Likewise, the

⁶⁹ B.F. Westcott, John, p.67.

Samaritan woman is too a foil for Jesus. What is mostly unnoticed, even by literary critics, is that, just as she understands Jesus more than Nicodemus does, so too does she act as a foil for the revelation of his nature. On one level, of course, this episode is an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate his humanity, to choose another to serve him. Outwardly, at least, he puts himself in a dependent position. 'The Teacher first met His hearer on the common ground of simple humanity, and conceded to her the privilege of conferring a favour'.⁷⁰ This is one of only two episodes in the Gospel when the Saviour asks for something ; the other being when he cries "I thirst" from the cross. Such a rare and important connection should strike people as significant (with the linkages John is establishing between suffering and glorification), but even a major scholar like Raymond Brown has claimed that there is little likelihood in the suggestion that the scene is deliberately being related to the crucifixion, where noon is also the hour and Jesus is again driven to express his thirst. It is also the only occasion in the gospel where Jesus' weariness is mentioned. It is possible to see a development in the passage from a purely human view on Jesus (he is tired, a Jew, thirsty) to the view of faith (he is God's equal). But I wonder whether this can be taken a step further. Only in the presence of this unlikely character does Jesus demonstrate such complete humanity, such need, such dependence. Is this, too, not a masterstroke of John's characterisation, in that the occasion for one of Jesus' fullest human revelations is in the most unlikely set-up, and this colours for the reader all future encounters? Only at the margins, at the point of need and of social boundaries, is Jesus' request (and God's request ?) for assistance able to be heard. After debating with Nicodemus about the law, Jesus comes and flouts conventions openly, initiating conversation with a woman, and talking to a Samaritan. Only those who know their own poverty are able to be confronted so directly with the truth of the message. In the concentration on specific literary techniques, it can be easy to lose sight of some of the wider and deeper issues in characterisation.

This intimate connection between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is partially achieved by the use of the mythos of romance, according to those literary critics who follow Northrop Frye ⁷¹ . She is seen as a potential bride according to their interpretation; John the Baptist has already been seen as a

⁷⁰ Westcott, John, p.68.

⁷¹ Stibbe, John, p.13, 69.

friend of the bridegroom. Only Nicodemus is left out of this atmosphere of wooing and betrothal. In this Cana - to Cana section of the gospel, the Nicodemus episode increasingly stands out as a time when there is confusion. Yet, with the Samaritan woman, the bonds are very close. Echoing the tensions of the Prologue between God's will and human will, and echoing the unlimited fulfilment of human need displayed at the wedding feast in Cana, this passage depicts on one level two human beings on a search who discover one another as if by chance, and fulfil not just the immediate needs which have brought them to the same place, but also their deepest spiritual needs and purposes. Nicodemus never gets so close to the real Jesus, human or divine. Coming after that night-time encounter, life in the heat of the day, under pressure, is that much more revealing.

Yet, as Westcott says, this dialogue complements as well as contrasts with the Nicodemus episode. There are some crucial elements in common. Like Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman is alone. Like Nicodemus, the woman represents a group - the Samaritan townsfolk. Like Nicodemus, she goes through a conversation with Jesus in which she is gradually being forced to confront the truth. The conversation follows an identical pattern. Jesus says something, which is then misunderstood; Jesus reformulates his original statement; that is still misunderstood; and then Jesus forces his dialogue partner to discover and face up to the truth for him / herself.

(iv) Nicodemus and Mary of Bethany

The contrast between Nicodemus and Mary of Bethany is most closely marked by their alternative responses to the body of Jesus. In chapter 12 Mary uses a sweet smelling ointment for Jesus' feet, using an expensive enough form of pure nard, enough to outrage Judas the purse keeper with her apparent extravagance. Jesus praises Mary, and encourages her to save the rest of the ointment for his actual death. In contrast the vastly larger number of spices used in chapter 19 by Nicodemus, a hundred times larger than Mary's, did not seem to have the effect that one pound had - we are not told of the tomb being filled with the sweet smell of the ointment. Lastly, the contrast between the amount of spices used marks the gulf between the faith of Mary who believed in an imminent resurrection (consonant with the experience of Lazarus being raised) and Nicodemus who believed, presumably, that if anything happened it would be a long time. Nicodemus and Joseph have a

more limited outlook. Mary shows an ability to reach out and touch the Lord in her own intimate way, which seems to be possible for the two men only after Jesus' death. Does Mary perform her rites of embalming better than Nicodemus fulfils his duties ?

On a theological level, Mary shows herself more in line with God's ever expanding generosity than Nicodemus. If the first episode with Nicodemus acts as a narrative form of the prologue, the second appearance of Mary echoes both the prologue - 'the Word became flesh; he made his home among us; and we saw his glory' - and the central kerygma of chapter 3 - 'for God so loved the world'. She incarnates God's gift of a light and life which cannot be conquered, and a sacrificial giving which will bring the best for others. The outpouring of God's love, exemplified in the use of nard, is continued in the waters of baptism, and in the giving of the Holy Spirit. Only those who are legalistic in their attitude to the Law can fail to perceive the limitless generosity of which the Law had been a first step.

Mary's rhetorical role as a counterpoint to Nicodemus sounds a note of poignancy. This Gospel accentuates the amazing generosity of God's love, and also thus highlights the tragedy of those who refuse it. Mary's faith does not depend on signs. She has believed, and that faith has preceded her brother being raised from the dead. Not that she has believed fully either, because as the opening verses of chapter 11 make clear, she has not entirely understood what has happened to her brother. The stench of death, however, neither she nor her sister have to endure; only Nicodemus remains in fear of its pervasive odours, and ridiculously tries to snuff it out.

5. Conclusion

Nicodemus is characterised as an enquirer, or an explorer on a journey of faith. His approach is tentative, and he is trying to connect the parts and the whole of his life and faith, sorting out his experience and his expectations. He is in the process of trying to integrate his past experience and present convictions with Jesus' insights, and his behaviour indicates that he knows more than he can tell, one way or another.

The reader is presented with two patterns of clues concerning Nicodemus. One set define him from his background - from the Jews, and the Pharisees, moving by night; and his current activities - moving towards Jesus,

acknowledging him, defending him, taking part in his burial rites. Jesus' reaction to Nicodemus in 3:1-21 lacks his encouraging stance towards Philip and Thomas in 14: 8-11 and 20: 24-29 amid their difficulties. Even after three appearances, there are no comments about Nicodemus which can be used as conclusive evidence one way or another to show him as a true believer or unbeliever.

How then does this characterisation affect the reader? The questions left hanging about Nicodemus' convictions compel the readers to ask questions about what faith is, and to try to define it more precisely. Nicodemus' response seems wanting, because he does not seem to engage with Jesus as one who wholeheartedly believed in him might. The complex use of symbolism draws the reader into unresolved issues about identifying the reborn. Nicodemus' actions, are too, capable of higher and lower-level interpretations. The characterisation of Nicodemus, does not then, really decide anything that can be expressed as a theological statement, but it does draw the reader further into the quest to find how and what to believe. Meanwhile, Jesus is continually pointing beyond himself, and simultaneously draws attention to himself, yet remaining enigmatic and elusive.

In the next two chapters, we shall return to look at the Samaritan woman and the blind man in greater depth, and look for common patterns of faith development and narrative critical methods of expressing them.

Chapter 4

The Samaritan Woman

Contents

1. Introduction
2. The Samaritan Woman in Pre - Literary Critical Perspectives
3. Literary Critical Approaches
4. Revelation and Knowing God
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1. Introduction

In this chapter, I shall take a sample of pre- and post - literary critical approaches, to deal with John 4 : 4-42. The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is the longest single encounter Jesus has with any single individual in this gospel (or any other gospel), in terms of the amount of space given to it by the author. This episode has thematic links, and others, with Nicodemus, and further explores the nature and consequences of belief in Christ. Broadly the methodological treatment will be the same as the last chapter, but instead of detailing at length how the characterisation of the woman dovetails with the others, I shall outline what is special about this episode in terms of what it says about knowing God and the nature of revelation. This time, though I shall make especial use of two writers (one writing before the advent of literary criticism and the other taking account of it) who have one particular main interest - revelation - and examine their arguments and seek out the consequences for the Johannine ideas of believing and knowing, and the connections with the the thought of Polanyi.

2. The Samaritan Woman in Pre -Literary Critical Perspectives

The fact that the Samaritan woman has had five husbands, and that Jesus has some special knowledge of this, has often been the most featured part of commentary on this story. However, it is primarily a faith encounter. The Samaritan episode is one which is treated by Rudolf Bultmann in his commentary in detail, and one which brings out the essence

of Bultmann's existentialist interpretation of Johannine faith. I shall explore Bultmann's comments on the chapter, using them as a model of one of the most acute pre-literary critical treatments of this chapter. Then I shall point out where Bultmann misses out on some significant details, which his very redactional frame of mind causes him to dismiss.

Bultmann sees the passage as dividing simply into two halves - vv.1 - 30, Jesus' witness to himself, and vv. 31- 42, the relation of the believer's witness to Jesus' self-witness⁷². As Jesus' revelation to Nicodemus has been followed by the Baptist's witness, so Jesus' revelation to the woman is followed by the witness of the believers. Jesus' initial request for water from a Samaritan woman shows his readiness to abandon traditional Jewish ways. But the theme of the relationship between the Jewish and Samaritan people is not followed through in that way. Instead, 'its place is taken by the characteristic question of Johannine dualism, whether Jesus' gift is of the earth or of God'.⁷³ The new fact of that revelation places old questions in a new and different light.

The discussion on the living water, v. 10-15, is for Bultmann, another episode in which the encounter with Christ

'means a radical reversal of normal standards: man, for all his possessions, is in truth poor, and Jesus' poverty only conceals the riches of his gift. If men are to recognise his riches two conditions must be fulfilled: 1) A man must know what it is that he has to receive from God, a knowledge which is at one with the realisation of his own poverty. 2) A man must recognise the Revealer when he encounters him in tangible form. Since, however, the gift of the Father is the revealer himself, such knowledge and recognition are intimately connected. Yet the knowledge may precede the recognition, inasmuch as there is a knowledge of God's gift which precedes the actual receipt of the gift, a questioning, waiting knowledge, which contains the prior understanding from which, in the encounter with the revealer, recognition springs.....Such recognition is a recognition in spite of appearances....'⁷⁴

Our knowledge of living water, then, is potentially a step towards the truth when confronted by the living word. Bultmann's theological idea of revelation is that:

'Man possesses a prior knowledge of revelation, and this consists in a

⁷² R.Bultmann, The Gospel of John, (1971), p. 176.

⁷³ Bultmann, John, p.179.

⁷⁴ Bultmann, John, p.181.

knowledge of one's own situation which leads one to seek constantly for its true meaning. In such prior knowledge man in no way possesses the revelation, the *alethinon* ; indeed it can lead him to destruction, if he attempts to derive from it the criteria by which to judge how God must confront him and how the revelation must become reality. For it becomes reality only as an event which passes all understanding. Our prior knowledge is a negative knowledge : the knowledge of man's limitations and his estrangement from God, combined with the knowledge that man must look to God for his salvation; the knowledge that God does not confront me in my world, and yet that he must confront me if my life is to be a true life. The event of the revelation is a question'.⁷⁵

Continuing his linkage with Gnostic dualism, Bultmann perceives in John a positive relationship between human existence and the revelation of Christ, because of the way in which the revelation is described in material terms : bread, light, water. In the very act of mistaking what is untrue for what is true, human beings show they have some knowledge of what is ultimately true, for the attribution of significance to earthly things - even when it rightly belongs to heavenly things - shows an ability and a form of knowledge. Revelation, is, in Bultmann's view, not simply a revealing of the truth about Christ, but also the truth about human beings. It is an experience of which knowledge of oneself and of the other expand and yet still connect. There is direct and inextricable linkage between knowing God and knowing oneself. In v.16-19, Jesus displays his knowledge of all things, a display of powers that convinces the woman that he is a prophet, and perhaps more than that.

This dialogue is summarised by Bultmann as not a conversion narrative but a conversation narrative.⁷⁶ In this he does to some extent prefigure literary critical concerns, though he underestimates the way in which John deploys the character of the Samaritan woman - 'He has no special interest in the figure of the woman herself'.⁷⁷ This fails to do justice to her special role. He sees this passage as a demonstration of the possibilities of the response to the revelation, how ideas of oneself and God are clarified and the decision of faith made urgent. As she learns more about Jesus and about herself, so the reader correspondingly asks searching questions about himself.

The spreading of the word among the Samaritans creates what Bultmann calls 'first' and 'second' hand hearers. The messenger through

⁷⁵ Bultmann, John, p.61-62.

⁷⁶ Bultmann, John, p.193.

⁷⁷ Bultmann, John, p.193.

whom Jesus works is of decisive importance because he leads others to Jesus. Yet in so doing he renders himself of no importance, and the 'second-hand' hearer now hears the message at 'first-hand'.⁷⁸ A contrast is drawn between faith which is spread according to the word, and mere human babble. Some human words contain The Word; some do not. That places the onus of responsibility on the hearer of the word to ascertain the true nature of the words he hears.

'Thus we are faced with the strange paradox that the proclamation, without which no man can be brought to Jesus, is itself insignificant, in that the hearer who enjoys the knowledge of faith is freed from its tutelage, is free, that is to criticise the proclamation which brought him himself to faith. This is why it is impossible ever to give a definitive dogmatic statement of the proclamation, because every fixed form of words, in that they are human words, becomes *lalala*. The eschatological word becomes a phenomenon within the history of ideas'.⁷⁹

Finally, he says,

'Then it is clear that such knowledge can be gained only in the eschatological event of an encounter with the Revealer himself, and that therefore the man who bears the message at second-hand is in no sense inferior to the man who hears it at first-hand'.⁸⁰

Bultmann's concentration on the theme of revelation in regard to believing and knowing stresses of course the divine initiative. The other side of the coin is the human search for God. To redress the balance, I shall turn to one work, John Painter's The Quest for The Messiah which has explored this dimension.⁸¹ Painter's mostly historical critical work on John as a quest story nevertheless takes account of the literary critical contribution. 'John is a literary work from the first century. It is unrealistic to treat it as if it were a twentieth century composition and as if everything depended on the reader, as is argued by some reader-response critics'.⁸² His aim is 'to understand John as a whole and to perceive within the whole the place of types of stories,

⁷⁸ Bultmann, John, p.200.

⁷⁹ Bultmann, John, p.201.

⁸⁰ Bultmann, John, p.201-202.

⁸¹ J. Painter, The Quest for the Messiah, (1994).

⁸² Painter, Quest, p.5.

recognisable within ancient literature'.⁸³ He finds two types of quest stories in John. The first group shows a variety of persons and a variety of things sought for, though ultimately Christ is the real aim (realised or not) of these quests. Jesus identifies himself with the the things sought - water, life, bread, the kingdom. The different quests pursued are manifold and sometimes apparently contradictory. Since their quest is for the Messiah, the evangelist must communicate an understanding of Messiahship which reflects his understanding of Jesus. 'Consequently, the Gospel is a self-conscious reinterpretation of the meaning of Messiahship. It is also a reinterpretation of the quest for the Messiah as the quest for life, for eternal life. According to John, the Messiah is none other than the revealer of God, the one in whom God is known, and in whom eternal life is present'.⁸⁴

In relation to the Samaritan episode, Painter finds himself disagreeing with Moloney, one notable literary critic. Criticising those who see the woman's response as a model of the absence of faith, he takes account of the 'positive nature of the response which bears no marks of intended irony or sarcasm on the part of the woman even though it does involve misunderstanding'.⁸⁵ Both the main characters are on their separate but linked quests in their encounter. However, these quests are not of the same order! Jesus is questing for drink, and for true worshippers. Painter notes that the woman's activity of leading others to Christ follows the pattern of chapter one, where every new disciple in turn brings another to Jesus. But Painter argues that the revelation to the woman is the revelation of the Messiah, not of the Godhead, of which aspect only the reader, having read the Prologue, would be aware.⁸⁶ This is still not knowledge of Christ in the fullest sense.

Painter notes the difference in time perspective between the Samaritan woman episode and the Nicodemus and Temple episodes. The latter two keep apart the present moment of Jesus' humanity from the eschatological moment of fulfilment. In contrast, during chapter 4, the two moments coalesce, because "the hour is coming and has come now". The end feel of the chapter is success - the success of those questers for the truth, and the success of the one questing to bring it, even if the recipients are often

⁸³ Painter, Quest, p.6.

⁸⁴ Painter, Quest, p.9.

⁸⁵ Painter, Quest, p.204.

⁸⁶ Painter, Quest, p.206.

unlikely people. Painter ends by noting : 'John has transformed the traditional stories into quest stories because he perceived the turmoil of human life as a quest and Jesus as the fulfilment of the quest of all who were searching : the *ego eimi* sayings have their place as evidence that , against all unfulfilled frustrations of human life, Jesus was able to present himself as the true fulfilment. All are questers until they come to Jesus. On the other side of this issue, those who seek and find discover that they have been the object of the quest of Jesus and that in him God is in the quest for true worshippers'.⁸⁷

3.Literary Critical Approaches

The reader's encounter with the Samaritan woman is deeply coloured by what has just transpired : the dialogue with Nicodemus. A Samaritan female follows on from the learned male teacher of Israel. She is taken by surprise, yet progresses further than her predecessor who has seen the signs but has not openly and boldly proclaimed his faith. Servotte appropriately names this contrast as a diptych, though I think there is more to the comparison than the 'same theme treated in a different tonality'.⁸⁸

Inter-Textual Echoes

Drawing on the work of Robert Alter literary critics have pointed out that the meeting at a well of a major character with a future spouse is a conventional biblical type-scene.⁸⁹ It happened to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, and the references to Jacob reinforce the connections with the patriarchs. Alter's work drew attention to to the role of convention in biblical narratives. He identifies some 'larger patterns of recurrence in the macrocosmic aspects of the stories and which are strictly tied to stylistic formulas'.⁹⁰ Noting that the same kind of story seems to be told several times about different characters, or even about one character, he designates these instances 'type-scenes'. He comments that the Bible does not indulge (unlike epic poetry) in descriptive detail, except for matters of theological import, and it uses everyday events as purveyors of things of great meaning, and he lists the most common biblical type-scenes as 'the annunciation of the birth of the

⁸⁷ Painter, Quest, p.212.

⁸⁸ H.Servotte, According to John, (1994), p.22.

⁸⁹ R. Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, (1981), ch.3.

⁹⁰ Alter, Biblical Narrative, p.49

hero to his barren mother; the encounter with the future betrothed at a well; the epiphany in the field; the initiatory trial; danger in the desert and the discovery of a well or another form of sustenance; the testament of the dying hero'.⁹¹ The stories in Hebrew scriptures of encounters with the future betrothed include the following elements : the meeting of previously mutually unknown parties; the use of a large amount of dialogue; the use of more detail than is usually employed; and an intricate use of the technique of repetition. That is the structure. The content of these stories include : a hero beginning travels in foreign regions; the stranger drawing water from the well; questions and answers; domestic detail; and some interesting liaisons. These stories, says Alter can be merely alluded to, or instead transfigured so as to draw out the theological significance and historical awareness of a particular event. The Hebrew reader / listener would anticipate such stories, and with that background 'the biblical authors set words, themes, motifs, personages and authors into an elaborate dance of significant innovation. For much of art lies in the shifting aperture between the shadowy foresight in the anticipatory mind of the observer and the realised revelatory usage in the work itself' ⁹² In John's encounter story, certain features are significantly altered. The scene is dominated by conversation, not by actions. Indeed, Jesus' request for water is not met. The topic of interest shifts from the provision of drinking water to the source of eternal life. The woman herself has been married five times - undermining any sense of security and fulfilment.

These are all clues to the role of the Samaritan woman within this dialogue and within the gospel as a whole. At the point where tradition is most emphasised - the Hebrew convention of a narrative of a hero encountering a bride at an historic well - Jesus moves radically beyond the habits and beliefs associated with such a background. The moment at which he allows the Samaritan woman to serve him is the point at which he draws Jewish theology into the present moment and gives it its long-promised fullness of meaning, in the sense of the message being extended to all nations and types of people. Both the content of faith and the manner of its expression - worship - are at issue here. Worship is the key issue of the chapter. But the worship is worship 'in spirit and in truth', and therefore presumes knowing the true God. Worship and belief are inextricably connected, and this chapter extends the frontiers of what is possible in this world for encountering God and God's

⁹¹ Alter, Biblical Narrative, p.51.

⁹² Alter, Biblical Narrative, p. 67.

purposes.

The inter-textual use of the pattern of Old Testament betrothal type-scenes provides an opportunity for the narrator to engage further with the reader. Some of the oddities of the Samaritan woman episode can perhaps be subsumed under Staley's statement : 'Reader- Response Criticism's interest in the rhetoric of entrapment, then, may help us to understand some of the narrator's self-contradictory passages in the Fourth Gospel as neither tensions that need to be resolved through the invention of multi-layered editing processes, nor as differences that somehow must be harmonised. Rather, it might be possible to see the contradictions as tensions to be embraced and analysed in terms of their effect upon the implied reader; as tensions which might help us better understand the rhetorical strategy and theological purpose of the Gospel'.⁹³ After the uncertainty generated by the Nicodemus episode, the Samaritan woman conversation leads to rapprochement between narrator and reader. The author provides opportunity for the implied reader to use his knowledge of Hebrew scripture, and in so doing the betrothal scenes are brilliantly parodied, in a very knowing way, which accommodates the reader. The typology at the same time provides a reinterpretation of the older stories which creates division between those who see and those who do not. It also provides almost a gossip's eye-view on the story, engaging the reader's attention as memories of betrothal are re-awakened. As for the characters involved in the parody, it is crucial to compare the knowledge of the character with that of the reader. The level of a character's knowledge and the level of a reader's knowledge is the crucial axis of the narrative rhetoric. It is actually central to a text's rhetoric. The reader does know, for instance, long before the disciples, about Jesus' signs.

John 4: 4-42

Adopting the procedure used by Stibbe the following aspects of the chapter need more detailed treatment in order to demonstrate the range of literary devices employed by John to narrate this faith encounter: context; structure; themes; literary devices; characterisation and plot type.⁹⁴

As mentioned above, this section stands in stark contrast to Jesus' conversations with Nicodemus. The place - from Jerusalem to Samaria; the setting - from city to country; the time of day - from night to the heat of noon ;

⁹³ Staley, The Print's First Kiss, p.96.

⁹⁴ Stibbe, John, p.62.

the gender - from a man to a woman; the social place - from a leading Pharisee to an ordinary woman; from a request to the Messiah to a request from the Messiah; from an unsuccessful dialogue to an encounter which brings active faith. Along with Mary, the mother of Jesus, the sisters Martha and Mary, and Mary Magdalen, this is one of several major passages (some exclusive to John's gospel) portraying women as becoming faithful disciples. Stibbe points out that feminine words are three times more plentiful than masculine ones in this chapter - twelve words connected with *gune* versus four from *andra*.⁹⁵

The chiasmus of the passage shows that the main topic is the nature of true worship. Verses 4-9 and 39-42 concern Samaritans coming to Jesus; verses 10-15 and 27-38 concern spiritual nourishment; and verses 16-26 concern worship. Both vocabulary and themes are echoed from one section to another. These by now familiar themes reappear, but with new additions. We have references to water, knowledge, life, truth, sight, faith, the hour, Spirit, seeking, coming to Jesus; sending; the work of Jesus; witness; and remaining with Jesus. The new theme is worship, and whereas the woman has been worried about the 'where' of true worship, Jesus preaches the 'who' of true worship, the personal relationship (as chapter 14 of the farewell discourse makes clear) of believer with God through him. This universal, not local, worship picks up the themes of how Jesus replaces religious institutions as his risen body is to become the new Temple, as in chapter 2.

John's use of literary devices here reinforces the strong sense of there being different levels of understanding at work. Double entendre is obvious in 4:10. The phrase 'living water' conveys the sense of both fresh drinking water as well as something spiritually more life-giving. The use of misunderstanding as a device helps to carry the momentum of the conversation between Jesus and the woman, and is also found in Jesus' conversation with the disciples. A sense of contrasting reactions to Jesus is achieved partially by the use of dual stage settings. We are aware in chapter 4 of action in the foreground and action in the background. At one moment Jesus and the woman are front of stage, whilst the disciples are backstage, searching for food; later Jesus and the disciples are in the foreground, whilst the Samaritan woman is moving amongst her people in the background. The juxtaposition of similar actions with rather different results also shows up the contrasts. Both the disciples

⁹⁵ Stibbe, *John*, p.63.

and the woman make separate journeys to the town and back, but only the woman's trip brings results in terms of people.

The full range of Jesus' characterisation and identity is revealed in this chapter. Starting with Jesus' supplication for water, it moves towards his self-revealing "I am". He is not just displaying ordinary human needs - he is showing an acute and urgent need. This is the only place in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus' limitations of human energy are mentioned - 'he was wearied with his journey' (4.6). The unusually marked references to Jesus' humanity underline the extent of understanding the woman must achieve to reach full faith. She must see, in this thirsty Jesus, the Son of God. The word reveals itself in the flesh, yet the sight of the flesh is not enough - it is hearing, more than seeing, that leads to conversion. This is the only occasion in John's gospel that Jesus confirms that he is the Messiah. This first acknowledgement comes in the first of several "I am" statements that link his true being with the nature of the God revealed to Moses in the burning bush. The Samaritans, not the Jews, are the recipients of this direct revelation. Yet it is also highly personal - v.21, "Woman, believe me..."

Jesus' divinity is emphasised as much as his humanity in this chapter. Out of divine necessity he must needs travel through Samaria. He refers to the gift of living water, and says it is the gift of God, and only he - Jesus - can give it. His knowledge of human nature is complete - he knows everything about the Samaritan woman. The titles used increase his stature one by one: Lord, prophet, messiah, saviour of the world, and "I am". 4:26 marks his first full personal self-declaration. Jesus demonstrates his omniscience in this episode. He understands the strangers he comes across, and he knows things which are hidden from them. But here, as elsewhere, Jesus' revelation is not simply about God or about himself: it is about the human beings to whom he witnesses. In the midst of the confusion and struggles with life exhibited by the Samaritan woman, Jesus points to the truth of her situation and of his. The growth in understanding of truth is not simply a growth in understanding of another, but of oneself. The passage illustrates the dynamic interplay of growth between God's knowledge and self-knowledge. The God of whom he speaks is one who consists of spirit, and who must be worshipped in spirit and in truth. God is not limited or controlled by human beings, nor by the constraints of matter, however much God may make use of those to make his purposes manifest.

Such is the effect that meeting Jesus has on the

Samaritan woman, she reacts by calling people to him in the same phrase that Jesus and his disciples use, "Come and see". Just as the disciples had called one another to follow Jesus, she calls her people to Jesus. Outside the circle of those close to him - the twelve, his mother, and John the Baptist she is Jesus' first true believer. Indeed, Jesus addresses her with the title that elsewhere he only uses for his mother, 'Woman', at Cana and at Calvary.

The woman, too, is depicted as a fully human being, one who is in need, and as a woman. She reacts to Jesus with a mixture of indignation, surprise and uncertainty. After her initial hesitancy she soon enters the debate with vigour, and throws herself into her newfound mission. Gradually Jesus illuminates her understanding, and to her he is able to confide his identity. Both her personal characteristics and her lines of dialogue make her more than a foil. She shows a certain fearfulness, but hers is overcome. She is an example of a healthy progress in faith from a state of dependence on authority - whether her people's or Jesus' - to an assurance which relies on experience.

But she is not just an individual on her own. She is also a representative - of discipleship, and of her Samaritan people. By abandoning her water jar, she symbolises the start of discipleship - the need to leave everything behind, and so be free to witness. The narrator uses the analepsis of "come and see" from chapter 1 to emphasise her role as a true disciple. Then, as a Samaritan, witnessing to her own people, she symbolises their potential, and helps to lead them to it. Her message, *dia tou logou*, brings people to faith in the way that Jesus will indicate in the High Priestly prayer of John 17, v.21 "who through their words believe in me". So successful is her work that she brings people to Jesus. In this way, she fits into the description of the true disciple in 15. 8, one who brings fruit, fruit that will last, because her converts beg Jesus to remain, and it is those with whom Jesus remains who have a permanent relationship with him.

Whereas Jesus is concerned with water, the disciples are searching for bread. As W. Howard-Brook comments : 'At the socio-theological level, it contrasts how Jesus and his disciples get their respective needs met : while the disciples participate in the established system of things (the market place), Jesus initiates new systems by breaking down the cultural codes that limit the opportunities for sharing of resources among people.'⁹⁶ By the time of their return to Jesus, Jesus' rapport with the woman is so strong, and their astonishment so great, that they now appear as outsiders to this

⁹⁶ W. Howard-Brook, Becoming Children of God, (1994), p.103.

encounter. The narrator emphasises that none of the disciples asked Jesus or the woman any questions, in contrast to the woman's questioning stance. The disciples repeatedly show their ignorance, which Jesus himself points out, saying that "I have food to eat of which you know nothing". More positively, by using what seem to be contemporary proverbs, Jesus tells them that they too are reapers and sowers in eternal life. Knowing what the Samaritan woman is doing with the townsfolk at this moment, he invites the disciples to understand his purposes.

The Samaritans hail Jesus as the Christ and Saviour of the world. They go further than the Jews. Unlike the Jews, who are unworthy of trust, according to the narrator's comments on Jesus' thoughts, the Samaritans can be trusted with the full truth. Again his own received him not, and outsiders have a special purpose in God's plan. Furthermore, the Samaritans urge Jesus to stay with them. The word *meno* in John, indicates a depth and security of relationship which has deep theological and epistemological significance.

For a brief space, it is worth narrowing the perspective down from the episode as a whole to the conversation alone. Given that the incarnate Logos is in dialogue with a human being, not for the first time, we may legitimately ask whether there are any particular characteristics to Jesus' conversations, and to this conversation especially. It is, as stated earlier, an unexpected and unlikely and illegitimate conversation, in that Jesus breaks two taboos by talking not just with a Samaritan but with a woman. The conversation occurs at Jesus' initiative, and yet the breaking of the ice is in the form of his making a request.

The subject matter of the conversation falls in to two sets of three exchanges : (i) water, in v. 7-15, (ii) husbands, v.16-25. Both are linked by the subject of identifying the God to whom true worship is due. The man with whom the woman is talking is a stranger to her, and the elusive Christ is a stranger to many. The challenge to her, delivered gradually but with increasing pressure, is for her to recognise him for who he really is. There is dramatic tension here - will the woman find herself with the fate of the world in the Prologue, which fails to recognise the Logos? Every episode of the Gospel has this basic tension, and John's plot development revolves around the successes and failures people have in recognising Jesus. Different literary critics have often widely diverging opinions on some of the dynamics of this conversation. Stibbe takes issue with the South African scholar,

Eugene Botha.⁹⁷ According to Botha, some of the rather odd jumps in the conversation, like that from water in verse 15 to husbands in verse 16, are due to Jesus giving up on a so far fruitless conversation, and moving on to potentially more fruitful topics. Applying speech-act theory to this conversation, Botha says that changing the subject of the conversation so suddenly is a flouting of the co-operation principles upon which all conversations rely. To Stibbe's mind, though, this is another example of discontinuous dialogue, in which the gaps and jumps in the level of literal meaning reveal the extent of the transcendent element of his message just waiting to bubble up and burst through. At the break in 4: 16, Jesus is able to reveal his supernatural knowledge about the reasons for the woman's inability to receive his living water. She has put her search for the right man ahead of her search for truth. This analysis of the content of the passage shows how we must look for evidence in both the form and the content of a passage for ways in which the evangelist is trying to communicate his theology of faith.

4. Revelation and Knowing God

In the character of the woman a passion can be seen which is akin to the passion Polanyi talks of in those who are committed to discovery, whatever the risks. She adapts quickly, and eagerly seeks more, though she does not know what exactly it is she is seeking. She has deep reserves of tacit knowledge, which Jesus taps into, and which she can swiftly make use of. Breaking the rules is not the obstacle for her it was for Nicodemus. In the end she moves from being an apprentice to Jesus to being a teacher of others. Meeting Christ has changed the way she looks at herself and at her world. She has clearly experienced revelation - but what is the role of revelation in Johannine faith?

Gail O'Day's book on Revelation in the Fourth Gospel : Narrative Mode and Theological Claim⁹⁸ looks at the question of revelation and the Bible as revelatory literature. The book is a demonstration of how John's technique of using irony gives him a suitable mode of expression for his theology of revelation. Form and meaning are thus integrally linked. O'Day identifies two current scholarly conversations : firstly, about the nature of revelation, and where the bible as revelatory literature fits in with wider notions

⁹⁷ Stibbe, John's Gospel, p.181.

⁹⁸ O'Day, Revelation in the Fourth Gospel. Fortress, 1986.

of revelation ; and secondly, the role of literary criticism in biblical interpretation.⁹⁹ The book is an effort towards combining the two.

O'Day begins by addressing basic questions and assumptions about revelation, what it is, where it is, and in what way God can be encountered through the Bible. She makes a very Johannine shift in terminology by moving from talking of the 'revelation' as a noun, to talking of 'revealing' as the verb.¹⁰⁰ As a verb, the central question will be how, where and what is God revealing? O'Day finds a point of contact between God's revelation, where both form and content are significant, and literary criticism take a similar approach to the text. Moving on to the specific features of the Johannine text, O'Day identifies gaps in scholarly literature concerning the distinctiveness of Johannine irony, and its theological significance.¹⁰¹ Providing a short critique of Culpepper and Duke, she outlines her similarities and differences from their approaches, with the special intention of seeing how John's use of irony invites the reader to share his theology. O'Day identifies the characteristics of the gospel which make the theme of irony a relevant issue to pursue in this Gospel.¹⁰² Firstly, John's use of the Logos concept - Jesus' identity has simultaneously to be grasped at the human and supernatural levels. Secondly, irony is dependent on the reader sharing some knowledge with the author. O'Day says the common frame of reference is the post-resurrection perspective, shared by author and reader, but not by the characters. Thirdly, the dualism of John has been frequently commented on, with reference to its main themes, such as light and darkness, life and death, but the form of the gospel is also pervaded by dualism. There are, for instance, plenty of double meaning words, which only become fully meaningful when viewed in the context of salvation history. Finally, Jesus' own indications that he knows some may see and some may remain blind shows that he is characterised as one who reveals, and therefore his words are not self-explanatory, but comprehensible to those who try to understand - this involving the reader. Then, the conversation in chapter 16 between Jesus and his disciples about talking in figures and talking plainly makes us explicitly aware of the veiled language Jesus and John are using.

⁹⁹ O'Day, Revelation, p.ix.

¹⁰⁰ O'Day, Revelation, p.2.

¹⁰¹ O'Day, Revelation, p.3.

¹⁰² O'Day, Revelation, p.7-8.

O'Day explores various categories for revelation - content, paradigm, encounter, and dogma, and finds them all wanting, in the sense that none of them do justice to the full width and depth of revelation. In fact, it is through the whole combination of stories, metaphors and images that the gospel has its effect. Whatever our attempts to reduce our experience of Jesus through John's gospel to a set of systematic categories, there is always something which will not be included or explained away. The reader is brought to Jesus' revelation through the expressive and creative use of language. Revelation does not lie in any one point - neither the meaning of the text, the events before it, the author behind it, or the public proclamation in front of it.

O'Day takes the Samaritan woman episode as the case study for her theories about Johannine revelation. (Her approach is not identical to that of other literary critics. For instance, unlike Stibbe, who sees the main issue of the passage as true worship, she sees the main issue as Jesus' identity). She stresses John's use of irony to enable reader participation in the text, and particularly his use of co-textual irony (irony that arises from a contradiction or disparity between the text and its literary context).¹⁰³ From this perspective she traces the outlines of all the kinds of irony to be found in chapter 4, especially where irony relates to issues of identity - of Jesus, of race, of gender, of believer and non-believer. O'Day, too appreciates the conversational nature of the episode, and its crucial connection to the revelation. 'The give and take between Jesus and the woman is essential to John's portrait of Jesus as revealer. The woman's struggle to move from her vantage point to Jesus', to understand fully Jesus' words and thereby discover who Jesus is, enables the reader to experience Jesus and his revelation in a way that would be impossible if reading straight discourse'.¹⁰⁴ Her most perceptive comment, and the one most pertinent to the issue of believing is :

'throughout the dialogue, John has let stand, often without explicit comment, two contradictory perceptions of the same event. The "correct" view is never allowed to stand in isolation. When Jesus makes an explicit statement (e.g. vv. 13 and 14, 23 and 24), John immediately undercuts it with the woman's response. The reader is left to decipher the relationship between the two perspectives and to choose between them. The ironic "double-exposure" of Jesus' statements and the woman's responses allows for reader participation in the revelatory process in a way that declarative statements could not. It is for this reason that the *ego eimi* of v. 26 has such tremendous impact on the reader.....

¹⁰³ O'Day, Revelation, p.55.

¹⁰⁴ O'Day, Revelation, p.63-64.

the *ego eimi* is therefore experienced, not just recounted'.¹⁰⁵

The remainder of the narrative confirms the revelation, and maintains the 'come and see' dynamics.

John's participatory presentation of the revelation enables the reader to encounter Jesus through the narrative. The multi-dimensional narrative keeps the reader alert and searching for wider significances. The characters in this episode become, from this point of view, not examples for the reader, but fellow participants. 'Their responses to Jesus often indicate their blindness to the second level of the conversation, making the irony more apparent to the comprehending reader.....the narrative anticipates that the reader will do more or other than the characters, including the disciples do'.¹⁰⁶

The personal nature of faith is thus emphasised, for the character and the reader are linked in their journey of faith by the constant challenge to present a personal response to Jesus. The revealing of truth has to be matched by an appropriate responsiveness.

5. Conclusion

Literary criticism has extended, deepened and refined earlier observations on the Samaritan woman. I do not think it necessarily contradicts any major earlier approach wholesale, but it does rather indicate the varieties of different readings, held together in a flexible frame of reference. No text which admits to a variety of possibilities in regard to its main theme - belief and unbelief - is going to permit of one absolute and unvarying reading. The episode of the Samaritan woman, and particularly the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, is one that gets at the essentials of the dynamics of Johannine thought about knowing God. For the conversation begins in a day-to-day situation, centred around human need. Both the situation and the need are capable of bearing further levels of meaning. John operates by association, and not even the smallest detail is without further significance. The conversation invokes a deeply personal exchange. Surprise is, as ever, a key element, with the disorientation of finding faith clearly undergirding the movements of the Samaritan woman. The surprise, or shock, operates on two levels : (i), in the way in which the revelation comes to its recipient, and (ii), in the way in which, for the other characters, the recipient of

¹⁰⁵ O'Day, Revelation, p.73.

¹⁰⁶ O'Day, Revelation, p.90.

the revelation is one they consider inappropriate. The questions thrown up by the beginnings of the revelation lead to wider horizons for both the immediate recipient, the spectators, and those whose lives are later touched by the Samaritan woman's mission. The fact that Johannine faith is active, dynamic, and shared (and subversive) is indicated again in the Samaritan woman's willingness to share it. Ultimately she is free, as her people are free, to recognise the divine presence in her own experience, and she no longer needs to stay with her teacher all the time. Out of the well springs of faith the world looks different. The outcast woman becomes a witness; the thirsty wanderer becomes a life-saving rescuer and love-bearer. Moral behaviour is clearly sidelined as a guarantor of insights into the divine presence. The insistency and urgency of the revelation means that it is potentially available in the most immediate sense to any person. Neither is faith individualist: thus the woman's representative role. Finding faith is a shared, not a solitary experience; and believing is an inter-dependent role and a sharing activity. Its outcome is worship - the first topic of debate and her final action of response.

Chapter 5 The Blind Man

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1. Introduction

Chapter 9 of John brings together some of the most pressing issues of the Gospel in a lengthy narrative. The restoration of a blind man's sight acts as a focus for the key issues which John is addressing. The most essential characters and groupings are all represented one way or another here: Jesus, the disciples, the Pharisees, the Jews, the crowds, and the ordinary people whom Jesus encounters. Every character and group of characters again illustrates some of the range of possible responses to Jesus. Again, among those committed to Jesus, there are nuances of commitment - and, on the other side there are a variety of degrees of non-response or even active opposition. John, writing concisely and allusively, takes us back and forth within the confines of his Gospel (and beyond to the scriptures), to indicate to us the role of the blind man in matters of belief. This story cross-references by implication quite considerably with the episodes of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, and as the third and last of my three studies, it will show some common patterns of the development of the theme of faith and knowledge.

We shall look first at what issues of belief and knowledge have been traditionally seen to be raised here, and then at the contribution literary criticism has to make to this area of study; and finally at the relation of this cameo to Polanyi's interpretation of the believing and knowing scheme in the Fourth Gospel.

2. The Blind Man in Pre - Literary Critical Perspectives

Before the advent of literary criticism, this healing story had already attracted a lot of close attention. Some have rated it for its dramatic layout, others for its use of symbolism, and some for its message of salvation. This is

the only case in the gospels where a blind person is reported as having been born blind.¹⁰⁷ This unique situation challenges the reader to look beyond a mere healing, to a deeper level of experience, which, because of the love flowing through Christ, effects the transition of a fellow human being from darkness to the light. In regard to my previous chapter, the blind man differs from the Samaritan woman in that she achieves insight through a conversation on a fairly informal and intimate level, whereas he achieves insight through the process of being confronted by the Pharisees. He does, however, parallel her, in the end, in that his final fullest realisation of who Jesus is leads him to worship. Both stories follow the same structural pattern. There are seven exchanges between Jesus and the woman, and seven scenes in this episode. Both in the end go through a similar process of progressive change, despite the very different circumstances. Both episodes involve the disciples. The presence of the disciples have not been mentioned since they were together with Jesus in Galilee in chapter 6. It is the first mention of their presence in Jerusalem with Jesus.¹⁰⁸

The episodes of the lame man and the paralytic are connected by their shared occurrence on the Sabbath, and the subsequent accusations against Jesus, and also by Jesus' absence in both episodes for some of the time during the debates about him. However, the agility of the blind man's thought and speech contrasts with the lame man. The blind man's personality traits are not just well-drawn, as the lame man's are, but also serve a theological purpose. His response to the opportunity of healing is more positive and quicker than the paralytic, who can only claim that he gets bypassed all the time. He is aware of Jesus' identity, the lame man is not. He defends Jesus; the lame man reports him to the Jews. The blind man achieves greater insight after the Lord has sought him out. In contrast, the lame man is to be found again in the Temple, whereas the blind man is excluded from the synagogue. Insofar as he has a representative role, the lame man represents those who have absorbed something of Jesus but do not make the final break with their past. By implication, he is associated with those who seek to persecute Jesus.¹⁰⁹

Two aspects of Jesus' behaviour have been noted : the issue of the

¹⁰⁷ R.H.Lightfoot, St.John's Gospel, (1956), p.199.

¹⁰⁸ R.Brown, Gospel according to John, p.371.

¹⁰⁹ Brown, John, p.209.

initiative for the sign, and the motivation for the miracle. Usually the disciples see a problem or an afflicted person - as they do here - and ask Jesus for comments or for action. Here, though, there is something about the blind man which grabs Jesus' attention. John is stressing Jesus' initiative in this pastoral occasion. The motivation for the miracle is intriguing. The Christ of the Fourth Gospel is often felt to be less human than in his Synoptic portraits. Whilst, on the contrary, it can be argued that the Fourth Gospel is the most human of his depictions, it is nonetheless true, that whereas in the Synoptics, his miracles are demonstrations of his overflowing kindness, or his compassion as Mark puts it, there is much less mention of his compassion during this or other miracle stories in John. Nor is it, as it might have been, a healing in the form of the forgiveness of sins, as verse 3 makes explicit. Jesus does not formulate any principles of the link between sickness and suffering. Referring specifically and exclusively to the case in hand, it is instead an opportunity for the demonstrating of God's glory. And what is implied is that what is going on is far more than the restoration of physical vision. The glory of God is shown both by the healer and the healed. The compassion of the Lord is one of the chief means of the revelation of his glory.

Chapter 9 may be divided into eight scenes, in each of which appear two characters or groups of characters, viz.

Scene 1 : v.1-5. Jesus and the disciples, discussing sin and suffering.

Scene 2 ; v. 6-7. Jesus and the blind man - the narrative of the miracle.

Scene 3 : v. 8-12. The blind man and his neighbours, hearing the story of the miracle.

Scene 4 : v. 13- 17. The blind man and the Pharisees, in dispute.

Scene 5 :v.18-23 The blind man's parents and the Jews, with the threat of excommunication.

Scene 6 : v.24-34. the blind man and the Jews, where faith overcomes fear of excommunication.

Scene 7 : v.35-39. Jesus and the blind man, in which the blind man comes to full faith in the Son of Man.

Scene 8 : v. 39-41 Jesus and the Pharisees, where unbelief is condemned.

John's arrangement of a basic miracle story can be regarded as an intricate dramatic piece. As with much drama of the period, only two characters or groups of characters appear on the stage at any one time. This serves to

heighten the dramatic effect, and in the context of the conflict of this gospel, intensifying this force. The scenes move quickly, and the narrator's voice is the only interruption to the action. The pace of the narrative echoes Jesus' reference to the time-limits on the period of his earthly activity in v.4. It is in this context that the urgency of his mission and presence overrides the Sabbath requirements.¹¹⁰

The dramatic lay out of this chapter has been well analysed by J.L. Martyn, who comments: 'He who reads the chapter aloud with an eye to the shifting scenes and the skilfully handled crescendos cannot fail to perceive the artistic sensitivity of the dramatist who created this piece out of the little healing story of verses 1-7. The end result is a dramatic unity which captures and holds the reader's attention, and effectively prepares him for the important discourse of chapter 10'.¹¹¹ Martyn provides an imaginative reconstruction, complete with suggested locations (though he divides the chapter into seven scenes).

John's strong emphasis on the dualism of light and darkness is the setting within which the episode of the blind man is framed. Here the themes of seeing, witnessing and believing as a human response to that light are most fully explored in the Gospel. There are in fact only two references to blindness in the gospel, here and at 12.40, where the prophecy from Isaiah 6 tells of God sending blindness so that people should believe in their hearts. Nonetheless, with the dense interconnectedness of John's writing, just one mention serves as the connection to much more material.

The blind man moves forward in his faith just as the first disciples and the Samaritan woman have done. From his healer to his Saviour, the blind man progresses in insight, and then states his faith and worships. Two opposite sets of dynamics are operating simultaneously. The conflict between light and darkness is echoed by the growing disbelief of many, and the corresponding schism and rejection of Jesus. The mention of light reminds the reader of the Prologue, and of the true origins and destiny of the world and its true Logos. The blind man recognises Jesus' signs as being from God. Here Jesus is named - by himself- as the light of the world, as in 8.12. The presence of this light brings judgment, but the judgment is not, it would seem from verse 3, on people's past, whether their origins or their sins, but on the

¹¹⁰ Bultmann, John, p.332.

¹¹¹ J.L.Martyn, History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel, 2nd. ed. Nashville, Abingdon Press, (1979), p.7.

main sin of all, unbelief, and their false claims to see, as verse 39 makes clear. The paradox is that in the presence of the true light, people who know their blindness gain insight, and those who think they can see are truly blind.

It is at this point that the connection between true faith and salvation needs to be brought out more explicitly. John is here engaging in debate with centuries of Jewish tradition about sin and suffering. Some parts of the Old Testament suggest a child can suffer for its parents' sins; other parts like Jeremiah and Ezekiel say this is not so. Is someone blind from birth, or even from the womb? In her analysis of this passage, Lieu puts it aptly: 'Sin is not independent of the response to Jesus, but neither does it determine it. Rather sin is defined by the response to Jesus: it is not the blind man who sinned, but those who claim to possess sight.' ¹¹²

The blind man episode acts as a prolepsis (a flash-forward) to the moment in John 12.40 where there is public debate on Jesus' ministry. In the quotation from Isaiah 6. 9-10 ¹¹³ there is a reminder in the later chapter of the divisive nature of Christ's saving mission, to save the sightless and to blind the sighted. Mark uses it in similar fashion in chapters 4.11-12; and Matthew uses similar thoughts but more positively associates blindness with cause and fulfilment. Luke uses this quotation to round off his Luke-Acts narrative, using it as a commentary on the history of disbelief in the face of Christian teaching. Generally, though, this line of thought from Isaiah seeks to place the ultimate responsibility for unbelief within God's design. John is not the only one to speak of this blinding and hardening. Lieu concludes '...a theological understanding of unbelief as blindness, with a degree of tension as to the question of ultimate responsibility, had already been worked out both in direct exegesis of Isa. 6. 9-10 and in the interpretation of the healing of the blind in the light of that tradition'. ¹¹⁴

John uses the symbolism of water in this episode as elsewhere. The pool at which this miracle occurs is the one from which the water was drawn for the Feast of Tabernacles. The mention of the meaning of "Siloam" - 'sent' - seems to reinforce a sense of Christ's all-pervasive apostleship. Whilst Christ never actually says "I am the living water", this is an almost implicit image. As Brown comments, this episode soon was given great baptismal significance

¹¹² J.V.Lieu, Blindness in the Johannine Tradition, *New Testament Studies*, 1988, pp. 83-95.

¹¹³ Lieu, Blindness, p.85.

¹¹⁴ Lieu, Blindness, p.90.

by the early church. In contrast, the lame man had never entered the waters of Bethesda - Jesus had just told him to get up and walk. Brown believes that John intended sacramental symbolism here because of the reference to the man's blindness since birth. The new birth that is possible in the waters of Siloam is shown to be derived from the living waters that Christ himself supplies. The blind man would thus be representative of more than his community; he would represent any human being turning from the sin of non-belief to faith. Nor is it unlikely that the baptismal associations come so far into the Gospel. Jesus' death is now much nearer, Brown comments 'as Jesus death draws closer, his life-giving activity increases. If we are correct in seeing baptismal significance in the healing of the blind man, this symbolic role has as its background Jesus' approaching death'.¹¹⁵

These associations of blindness and the use of water connect with the major theme of sin, and its fruit, unbelief. As Rensberger points out the largest number of words connected with sin of any chapter in the Gospel occur here in Chapter 9.¹¹⁶ The questions of what sin is, and what a sinner is, dominate this chapter. Disciples and Pharisees agree that the man's suffering is the result of sin. Moreover, Jesus is accused of sinning here by breaking the Sabbath law. The standards by which sin is judged are challenged by Jesus. The Pharisees use Mosaic Law, Jesus encourages the blind man like others, to look at the value of his own experience. The truth of his transition from darkness to light is a greater truth than the letter of the law. The one from whom all truth comes over-rides the technical details of the Law of Moses. (Meanwhile, the Jews start to contradict themselves). The new test is suggested by some of the Pharisees in John 9:16 "How can a sinful man do such signs?" The social consequences of belief are well expressed by Rensberger : 'They must either suppress their own experience or stand by it in defiance of those, who, in their own society, are in charge of their communal norms and their own interpretation. Johannine Christianity is thus not merely a sub-culture but a counter-culture within at least the local Judaism wherein it has precipitated so painful a conflict'.¹¹⁷ Rensberger's work is a sociological approach, not a literary critical one, but he makes some valid points, and the two approaches are not incompatible.

¹¹⁵ Brown, John, p.380-2.

¹¹⁶ Rensberger, Overcoming, p.44.

¹¹⁷ Rensberger, Overcoming, p.45.

The Pharisees had alleged that sin led to suffering. This passage shows that suffering may have a place on the road to belief, although it is never certain that suffering leads to belief. The real sin is unbelief, rather than the breach of moral codes of behaviour, and so the real tussle occurs between belief and unbelief. The blind man's experience of suffering is a crucial part of his faith journey, and so the painful but purgative effects of Christ's presence are felt to be redemptive. His deeper faith is not arrived at by a peaceful process of reflection but through the challenge posed by the Pharisees. The social consequences of belief, and public witness to it, entail conflict with those who would not accept the believer's experience, and accepting and entering that necessary conflict brings about a deepening of the original commitment. Such an atmosphere explains the almost chilling nature of Christ's words about judgment.

All the four Gospels' stories about the healing of the blind imply more than a purely physical healing. The restoration of the visual sense-organ is part of a process of restoring a wider, not entirely physical, vision. In John's gospel, as in the other Gospels, insignificant details play an important role in the story of healing the blind. The framework for the blind man's healing is the ultimate question of who is a sinner, and therefore who is a saved man, and these salvific questions of belief over-ride pure miracle-working. What is revealed, for those with eyes to see, is the glory of God as shown forth in the words of Jesus Christ, and the glory of God as shown forth in the blind man, who shares in the great "I am" of Jesus by using the same phrase.

It is worth elucidating the main alleged causes for 'blindness', and seeing how the theme of faith fits into that context. Blindness is commonly ascribed in biblical tradition and commentary to one of the following three reasons : (1) individual sin; (2) inherited sin, (3) the natural order of things. We may tentatively suggest that the Fourth Gospel tends towards the third option. Jesus neither entirely rules in nor entirely rules out (1) and (2), and by implication (3) would seem to have some currency. It is in the very nature of creatureliness to be imperfect - 'original sin' - and not merely a matter of individual or collective wrongdoing. Both in their inner and in their outer lives, human beings face the tug of war between the things of the Spirit and the things of the world. Deep within the person, Logos theology would imply, is the ability to 'see'. An important growth point along the road to sight is the knowledge that one is blind. Admitting dependency is something even Christ has to do - he says that he too has been sent. By this point the blind man is

ahead of the disciples - none of them had bathed in the waters of 'sent', nor had recognised the Son of man, nor shared the blind man's identification in the words 'I am'. The blind man is amazingly direct with his responses - not attempting further theological reflection, but staying with first-hand experiences.

The question of authority looms large in this chapter. Who has the right to validate 'true vision'? The guardians of the old order are shown to be inadequate, both by Jesus and the blind man. The Pharisees are looking for new sights - Jesus wants to create in-sight. True authority is known not just by a shared vision, but by a shared being. The recognition of truth is the recognition of a common shared origin or destiny, the great 'I am'. That is the generative point of Christ's presence of the light of the world, sifting between those who live in truth and those who live in illusion.

What is belief, once arrived at? In regard to this chapter, it is perhaps best expressed by turning to Bultmann again, for he stresses the process of recognition (which ties in with his existentialist theology):

'Belief' in the Son of Man cannot refer to the expectation of the Son of Man who will come on the clouds of heaven, but to the recognition of a present figure, as is shown by the healed man's immediate asking who the Son of Man is that he may believe in him. as yet he is unaware that his helper is the 'Son of Man', the eschatological bringer of salvation.... the immediate cause of the confession is neither a theophany, nor a straightforward demand that he should believe, compliance with which would be no more than an arbitrary act of will. But whereas man's experience would remain obscure to him without the intervention of the spoken word, so too the word itself is only intelligible because it reveals to man the meaning of his own experience'.¹¹⁸

Bultmann had commented earlier on the Prologue on how John uses the motif of light to explore the character of belief :

'and what is the significance of the light? By making the world bright, it makes it possible for men to see. But sight is not its only significant in that it enables man to orientate himself in respect of objects: sight is at the same time the means whereby man understands himself in his world, the reason he does not "grope in the dark", but sees his "way". In its original sense light is not an apparatus for illumination, that makes things perceptible, but is the *brightness* itself in which I find myself here and now; in it I can find my way about, I feel myself at home and have no anxiety. Brightness itself

¹¹⁸ Bultmann, John, p.339.

is not therefore an outward phenomenon, but is the illumined condition of existence, of my own existence..... the more completely *phos* is regarded as something eschatological, the stronger grows the conviction that the definitive illumination of existence does not lie within human possibilities, but can only be divine gift'. 119

3.Literary Critical Approaches

The surrounding framework for this episode is the conflict between Christ and the Jews, and this conflict gives rise to the emotive language. This chapter follows Jesus' secret exit from the Temple to avoid the stone-throwers. Despite what might have been good reason to leave Jerusalem, Jesus is still there. Christ's ministry has thus far been full of incident, characterised by feedings, healings and witnessing, and with accompanying divisions of opinion over his true identity. The pace of the story begins to slow down here, and it now takes ten chapters to proceed from the feast of Tabernacles to the final Passover. W. Howard-Brook notes that this chapter, along with the following section until the Passion, are incorporated not to primarily show the greatness of Jesus, but 'for its power to generate and sustain a community of discipleship'.¹²⁰ In fact there are three main strands to this chapter in terms of story-telling : (1) the mixed experiences of discipleship to which Jesus invites people, and the rejection of this by others; (2) a pathetic story of rejection and betrayal by the nearest and dearest not out of conviction but out of timidity before the world's power structures; (3) the underlying background of the unceasing blindness of worldly authorities, especially to the powerless.

In contrast to the character of Jesus, a small number of characters in the Fourth Gospel show evidence of considerable change during the course of their appearances. The blind man is one of the most prominent examples of this in the gospel, along with the Samaritan Woman. Staley notes Robert Alter's comments on the art of characterisation in ancient Hebrew narrative, who describes the four modes of narrative and lists (1) the narrator's description of the character in terms of actions, appearances, or attitudes and intentions; (2) one character's comments on another; (3) the

¹¹⁹ Bultmann, John, pp.40-43.

¹²⁰ Howard-Brook, Becoming, p.212.

direct speech of the character ; (4) inward speech (interior monologue). One of Alter's most perceptive comments is that the words of Hebrew characters are often 'more of a drawn shutter than an open window'.¹²¹

In terms of the literary form of the narrative, the closest chapter to chapter 9 in terms of form is chapter 5. John's miracle stories fall into three main groups, from Cana, from Galilee, and from Jerusalem. The blind man and the lame man both belong in the Jerusalem group. Both have in common the following features : one sick man, whose history is given, is healed at Jesus' initiative, at a pool in Jerusalem, on the Sabbath day. After Jesus' consequent disappearance, he is accused of breaking the Sabbath law, and then the Jews quiz the man on Jesus' whereabouts. After this Jesus reappears, and at some point there is an explanation of the relationship between sickness and suffering. Jesus' is virtually put on trial for this, and the deed is referred to as a 'work'.

The structure of chapter 9 is one of the most intricate thus far in the Fourth Gospel. Whilst historical critical approaches have tried to reduce the episode to an amplification of a small handful of verses from an original miracle story, narratological interpretation shows there to be a finely textured pattern of development of thought and action. W.Howard-Brook analyses two attempts to find a chiasmic structure in the passage. Rejecting these two attempts, one of which would see the Pharisees' rejection of the parent's testimony at the centre, and the second of which puts the conflict between the parents and the Pharisees at the centre, he suggests an alternative, which would place the parents alone at the centre of the narrative, with their refusal to tell what they know for fear of being expelled. W. Howard -Brook suggests:

a: 1-5 : Jesus' disciples : ask a question that alienates them from Jesus

b: 6-7 ; blind one : accepts invitation to wash (baptism) and sees

c: 8-17 : neighbours /Pharisees : ask questions that show their lack of faith

d: 18-23 : parents : refuse to tell what they know for fear of being expelled

c(i): 24-34 : Pharisees : again ask questions that show their lack of faith

b(i): 35-38 : healed one : accepts invitation to believe in the Son of Man

a(i): 39-41 : Pharisees with him : ask a question that alienates them from

¹²¹ Alter, quoted in J.L.Staley, 'Stumbling in the dark...', *Semeia* 53, pp.55ff.

Jesus.¹²²

The chiasmic structure is strengthened by the thematic parallels between the sections, on the themes of blindness and seeing, of sin and the world.¹²³ Whichever chiasmic patterns one finally adopts, it is clear that the 'felt' emphasis is on the painful splits within communities faced by the problem of conforming to authority and the world, or to their convictions, and the unavoidable conflict this entails. Whilst this goes beyond literary criticism, it is usually noted how close this would be to the experience of the original readers of the Gospel, for whom belief was not an armchair luxury, but a matter of life and death. That this section is the key emphasis is also implied by the sudden transition from the narrator's use of straightforward reporting to a long aside in vv.22-23. This is the one and only time in this chapter where the narrator's voice is heard so explicitly.

Words associated with sight and with sin dominate this chapter. 'Blind' occurs ten times; 'eye' appears ten times; and 'see' crops up ten times. Sometimes these describe physical realities, sometimes spiritual realities, and sometimes both. Associated with these words connected with sight are words related to knowledge and ignorance. The verb 'to know' comes up six times, and the verb between comes up 4 times. There are eight references to 'sin' or 'sinner', the highest number so far in the gospel.

Characterisation

The Pharisees are of course as such a sub-group of the Jews, but the narrator tends to lump them all together in this chapter. As the blind man represents belief, so they represent unbelief. Whilst he shows increasing faith, they show deepening unbelief, and the development operates in tandem. However, the Pharisees themselves are split at the sight of the man, and despite being constrained by the law, the nature of the sign is, for some of them, something significant to be taken into account.

One of the possible structural arrangements of the chapter, as noted above, gives the blind man's parents a central place. Their chief characteristics are negative - their unconcerned relationship with their son, and their fear of the Jews. They end up being the focus of the rejection not just of their son, but of Jesus, and therefore of belief. The conflict between belief and unbelief has struck at the very heart of the family. As Howard-Brook notes,

¹²² Howard-Brook, *Becoming*, p.214.

¹²³ Howard-Brook, *Becoming*, p.214.

the use of the word 'parents' is very unusual in the gospels. It is certainly unusual to shift from the public examination of a person and his belief, to his family background and upbringing. He suggests 'that in the context of the re-creation theme of the man's healing, the calling of his parents links the creation of humanity with the Genesis account of the first parents' sin'.¹²⁴ Christ the Logos here participates in the re-creation of the fallen. The narrator feels the need to explain this and so inserts his longest narrative explanation thus far in the gospel.

The crowd acts as a significant grouping in this episode. The 'neighbours and those who were accustomed to see him'(v.8) ask the question that the pharisees themselves will concern themselves about. Here we have witnesses to a miracle, but the theme of the witnessing is not developed. However, as Howard-Brook points out, this is not an homogeneous group. There is a distinction made by the narrator between those who have only known him as the wayside beggar, and those who have been familiar with his blindness since birth. This is the first time the man has been described as begging - his first mention was just as "a man who had been blind from birth". The response of the neighbours and bystanders to the blind man's answers are not recorded, but the fact that they bring him to the Pharisees is disturbing. It seems to be a cause for puzzlement and concern, rather than rejoicing.

This is the first noted appearance of the disciples since chapter 7. Even here, their contribution is brief. They ask the crucial question of the chapter : "Rabbi, why was this man born blind?", and then, having acted as a foil for Jesus, they are not referred to again in this chapter. Their follow-up question, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" is one from a context in which the notion of inherited sin through one's ancestors was common, although the Hebrew scriptures are contradictory on the subject (contrast Job's anguishing with Jeremiah 31;29-30 or Ezekiel 18 : 1-4) . What is new is the suggestion that the blindness could be due to personal sin, from even before birth. Such thinking shows a common mind-set with the Pharisees, and rather separates Jesus from his disciples, who here seem to be more of the world than of the light.

But the way in which the disciples have appeared after an absence, ask a crucial question, and then disappear again, makes us look for the full significance of their enquiry. It becomes, in fact, a key question of those

¹²⁴ W.Howard-Brook , Becoming, p.222.

who seek to find the true nature of belief, and therefore of its opposite, unbelief, but also of those who want to know the reasons. That Jesus' response to the question is not a technical answer but a practical action demonstrates the oscillation in the Fourth Gospel between thoughts about belief, and actions stemming from belief. By way of contrast, the disciples have yet to equal the blind man's personal and individual confession of faith. In chapter 6, Peter had said: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Your words are words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are God's Holy one"; but that could be read as a kind of group statement, rather than an owned commitment. Servotte notes that Jesus' use of 'we' in v.4 "While daylight lasts we must carry on the work of him who sent me" is indicative of the fellowship between Jesus and his true followers.¹²⁵ The same use of "we" in 3.11 again puts up the connection with Nicodemus., and the sense of true and false disciples.

Jesus here is at the focus of the conflict between good and evil, between belief and unbelief. He does God's works so as to resist sin and the power of sin. The conflict is increasingly intense, more deeply felt, and affects him and others ever more deeply. But it is not Jesus' presence which intensifies the conflict. Conflict grows too in his absence. As in the lame man incident, Jesus is at the centre of attention. Jesus is off-stage from verses 8-35. However, he remains the focus of attention, whether he is absent or present.

Stibbe sees ample room in this chapter for his description of Jesus as the elusive messiah. Having evaded his persecutors at the end of the last chapter, Jesus continues to pass unmolested through tricky situations. Jesus is in this chapter presented as healer and as judge. The healing comes first, but it is with judgment that the chapter ends. Judgment, Jesus says, is the purpose for which he came into the world. The discriminating Messiah brings salvation, and brings judgment, sorting and sifting between belief and unbelief.

The blind man's representative role is shown from the very start. There is an unusual Greek construction in the first verse. The usual Greek definite article is absent, and it is as if Jesus is not spotting one individual but gazing at all humankind. There is no mention until verse 8 of him as a beggar. Never is he named (as neither the Samaritan woman nor the lame man are) in the entire episode, even though his parents appear too. He is characterised by

¹²⁵ Servotte, According to John, p.50.

association -weakness, dependence, need. That is, until verse 9, when he says something which no other person except Jesus says in the Gospel: "I am". Ordinarily '*eimi*' would have been sufficient - the emphasis shows John's intended link with Christ's "I am" sayings.

Under interrogation, the blind man gives his own account of his healing. Howard-Brook notes five key differences between the narrator's account of the healing and the blind man's account of his own healing:¹²⁶

(1) The man described by John as *anthropos* yet describes Jesus as *ho anthropos* (cf. chapter 18), thus attributing a distinctive identity to Christ which contrasts with his own common humanity.

(2) He refers to his healer as Jesus, whose name has not otherwise been mentioned since the first verse. This man must have taken the first step to faith through hearing, by listening to conversations about Jesus.

(3) He refers to Jesus performing the healing with the clay, but omits to mention Jesus' use of his own spittle.

(4) The man uses the word *epechrison* to describe the placing of the clay on his eyes. This word means to anoint. The narrator had merely used *epetheken*, which means to put. Thus the blind man is allowed to put his own deeper, interpretation on an outward act.

(5) Whilst the narrator has referred to the pool of Siloam, the man refers only to 'Siloam', as if the name and life given through that name are all that matters, and the specific geographical origin no longer counts.

The man's role changes from being a semi-passive recipient of healing to being a witness to Jesus. Jesus' only healing which is not requested or urged upon him is the one that brings forth his most vigorous follower. More than a quarter of the words of this chapter consist of the blind man's own direct speech. His faith deepens progressively. In 9:11 he refers to "the man they call Jesus"; by v.17 he understands Jesus to be a "prophet"; by v.33 he is sure that Jesus is "from God". In v.38 he confesses Jesus as Lord, and by implication as "Son of Man".

Like the Samaritan woman, the blind man comes across as a strong character. He defies the authorities bravely, refusing to accept their line of questioning, and simply stating the truth as he sees it. Sarcasm is evident in v.27 "I have told you already" he retorted, "but you took no notice". Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples?" He interprets

¹²⁶ W.Howard-Brook, Becoming, p.219.

Jewish theology himself : “We know that God does not listen to sinners”, echoing the Pharisees’ false assumption in v. 24. “We know that this man is a sinner”. He takes steps to protect Jesus, by not mentioning his healer’s name at first under interrogation by the Pharisees in verse 15 . He also shelters Jesus from charges of three Sabbath violations by saying he “put clay”, rather than “made clay” or “anointed”, and by omitting Jesus’ command to “go and wash”. Under pressure, the once blind man reveals his stature.

John himself plays something of a trick on the reader. By omitting to mention that this healing took place on the Sabbath (as in chapter 5) until the Pharisees mention it, the narrator has allowed the reader to feel sympathy for the blind man and respect for Jesus, unaware of the full complexities of the situation.

The chief ironic feature of chapter 9 is the blind man himself, who functions, in narrative critical terminology, as an ‘eiron’, a person of irony in this chapter in the same way that Jesus does in the whole gospel. The thematic application of irony is to the subject of understanding and misunderstanding, with the play on the blind man’s increasing vision, and the Pharisees’ increasing blindness. The questions and comments of the Pharisees are increasingly heavy with irony, from their exhortation to “Give glory to God”, to their somewhat rhetorical question, “Do you mean that we are blind?” The blind man himself employs irony against the Pharisees, and indeed he is the sharpest follower of Jesus in this respect. Perhaps this is why Jesus can be absent so long, from v.8-34, his longest absence in the entire gospel. His upward spiral of conviction is accompanied by three times claiming not to know ; the Pharisees’ downward spiral is accompanied by bold statements of what they claim to know. In this chapter knowing is always expressed by the Greek word which incorporates both knowing and seeing, rather than just knowing alone.

4. Dialogue and Faith

The blind man struggles through a series of conversations which lead him to make the ultimate act of faith, to worship. That sense of struggle - which is there, too, to a lesser extent with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman - is here put in the context of suffering. Why do people suffer, and what is the connection, if any, with unbelief? Public commitment to the Christian faith was to cause more suffering for believers, so what does this chapter show

about how John's community of faith was actively facing up to that challenge, and how does the reader become involved?

In his book The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light : Language and Characterisation in the Fourth Gospel, Norman Petersen¹²⁷ explores the idea that John's language is a mixture of ordinary, everyday language, and a 'special' language appropriate to the Johannine community. The special language transforms everyday language in such a way that it becomes an anti-language. The way the language works in contrasts serves to point up the difference between true believers and unbelievers. Petersen takes an interdisciplinary approach, integrating sociological, literary and historical insights.

This special language is 'one that employs the grammar and vocabulary of the everyday but uses the vocabulary in a very different way, leading to misunderstandings and partial understandings on the part of those who can only speak the everyday language'.¹²⁸ This use of language also differentiates social groups in John's world. Whilst literary critics have given us studies of metaphor, irony, symbolism, double and multiple meaning, none have yet proposed, as Petersen has, that the gospel has a special type of language. John's special use of everyday language involves him 'creating synonyms out of terms that are not synonymous in everyday language and a contrastive style of thinking and expression in his frequent use of semantic opposites and grammatical negations'.¹²⁹ This means that 'because his synonymy blurs the referents of his language, what he says cannot be understood in terms of what his language refers to, but only, and in a limited way, in terms of the differences between what he says and what the users of the everyday language are saying when they use the same terms'.¹³⁰ With regard to the host of literary devices employed by John, he finds 'linguistic play between the everyday and John's special use of it',¹³¹ rather than just linguistic play within the possibilities of everyday language'. Petersen subtly brings out in a study of the Prologue how John uses words drawn from everyday experience to refer to things that are not part of everyday experience

¹²⁷ N.R. Petersen, The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light, (1993).

¹²⁸ Petersen, John, p.1 ff.

¹²⁹ Petersen, John, p.3.

¹³⁰ Petersen, John, p.3-4.

¹³¹ Petersen, John, p.4.

'The narrator doubly violates everyday language, first by using two words denoting different classes of things to refer to the same thing, and second by also using them to refer to different things. In terms of everyday language, what he says does not make sense and we cannot identify what he is referring to. Because he uses the words and grammar of everyday language, we can understand what he is *saying*, but we cannot understand what he *means* because we do not know to what he is *referring*'.¹³²

The key issue is that of reference. Quite what the things referred to are is unclear at first - whether the 'word' or 'God'. The experience of handling blurred language is therefore crucial to understanding the Gospel, and to sorting out the shifting emphasis on seeing, hearing and understanding.

Of crucial interest to a study of Johannine faith is Petersen's analysis of the synonymous use of 'receiving', 'knowing' and 'believing'. Not only is the 'Other' referred to in terms of synonymy, with its process of coming into the world and returning, but also the response to what has come into the world is referred to in similar fashion. 'Receive', 'know', and 'believe' are the three key words associated with reception, and these words come to be associated with different social groups. And, just like the synonyms used to refer to God / the word, the synonyms used for reception are unclear, because we do not know what they are referring to. Receiving 'does not mean receiving as of an object, 'knowing' does not mean knowing some particular information or an object, and 'believing' does not mean believing that something is true or false'.¹³³ Why does John employ such a language? 'John and his people speak and think in ways that are in contrast with the speech and thought of others in their social environment... John and his people oppose themselves, linguistically, conceptually, and, not least of all, socially.'¹³⁴ Petersen concludes that John's blending of the referents of his language means that we should not seek the referents but the difference. 'Jesus and others are usually at conceptual odds with one another, and this contributes to the plot of the narrative because the way in which Jesus is understood by others leads to his arrest and death'.¹³⁵

Moreover, words describing the 'receiving' of Christ 'behold', 'see', 'know' and 'receive' - are 'quite clearly not what is denoted by these verbs in

¹³² Petersen, John, p.9-10.

¹³³ Petersen, John, p.20.

¹³⁴ Petersen, John, p.21.

¹³⁵ Petersen, John, p.22.

everyday language, and neither is there any idea of sensory perception leading to language and meanings that make understanding in everyday terms possible, as among the people in John's narrative who 'see' X, 'think' Y, 'believe' 'Z' .¹³⁶ This habit is further strengthened when John not only does not use referential language but also tends to characterise things by what they are not. Petersen points out that the Beloved Disciple's reaction to the empty tomb shows 'belief here explicitly precedes a subsequent understanding of what was experienced and understood, and belief has no content, there is nothing that is believed because it is understood.'¹³⁷ The use of the understanding / misunderstanding motif, and the whole range of literary ploys, can be encompassed by the understanding that the special language refers to heavenly things, and it is the problem of reference which occurs repeatedly in the encounters and conversations in the Gospel.

In analysing Jesus' language, and that of the narrator, Petersen finds that a variety of different conceptual systems are employed to communicate his message). Petersen finds six of these systems : ¹³⁸

1. the word / became flesh and dwelt among us / (Jesus is glorified)
the Son of God / sent from the Father / goes or returns to him
2. the Son of Man / descended from heaven or above /ascends to heaven
the bread of life / comes down = descends from heaven /-----
3. the Light / shines or comes into the world / (darkness)
prophet or messiah / is coming into the world / remains forever

Of these, the light system is 'the only literal form of reference to the Other during the period of the incarnation'.¹³⁹ The Light system, he says , is the one which comes near to providing an explanation for John's use of language ; its three principal characteristics are 'the everyday language of differentiation; the non-differentiation of his special use of this language; and the contrastive

¹³⁶ Petersen, John, p.30.

¹³⁷ Petersen, John, p.40.

¹³⁸ Petersen, John, p.63.

¹³⁹ Petersen, John, p.64. The argument is complex, and the details are to be found in pp. 72 - 80.



character of his use of both the everyday and the special language'.¹⁴⁰

From this, Petersen analyses what he calls John's sociology of light, which has 'two aspects, one having to do with the social situation in which John's people find themselves, and the other with their conceptual response to it'.¹⁴¹ This language embodies the conflict and emotions of the fight between the receivers and the non-receivers, between the 'Sons of Light' and the "Disciples of Moses'. Chapter 9 is the most explicit and detailed working out of the Light system in terms of seeing and not seeing, in the social context of rejection. This chapter represents a war of judgment in which 'a special language inversion of the judgmental process in which the judges of everyday life become the judged'.¹⁴² The social experience of John's fellow believers leads to the use of special language to describe the incident around the blind man.

This integrated approach has much to commend it, and though complex, reveals more deeply the intra-textual echoes of this chapter with the themes of the rest of the Gospel. Faith is a shared experience, a journey with companions, and the personal costs of that risk-taking are etched in the material of the Gospel.

5. Conclusion

Chapter 9 achieves its effects through the skilful deployment of a number of literary devices. From the moment the blind man appears, there are loud echoes from chapter 3, and indeed, from the prologue. Both Nicodemus and the blind man are initially named as 'a man', both typify something of their particular grouping and something about themselves as individuals, but both are firmly introduced as representatives of the human condition. Neither the weight of learning nor the handicap of blindness can detract from their fundamentally similar choices and opportunities and challenges. The pharisee and the blind man live in different times. Nicodemus comes at night, entering from the darkness - and maybe returning to it? The blind man is a creature of the light, and for the first time since chapter 3 Jesus mentions the time of darkness, and the need to work by day (9.4). Jesus performs and the blind

¹⁴⁰ Petersen, John, p.76.

¹⁴¹ Petersen, John, p.80.

¹⁴² Petersen, John, p.81.

man undergoes the very experience Nicodemus balks at. The source of the living waters himself performs the recreation of the blind man, transforming water and earth into healing agents, and enabling the man to voluntarily immerse himself in the missionary waters of the pool of Siloam. The blind man himself uses words that understand the event in more vivid terms than the narrator has used. The narrator says Jesus put the clay on the man's eyes : yet the recipient says he was anointed. It seems that the blind man does not merely understand, but fully understands. There is a certain pathos to this solitary blind man, one heightened by the collective opposition of the Pharisees to him, whose chorus of "We know", picks up on Nicodemus' use of the first person plural. But their collective certainty suffers from the problem of failing to hear where the spirit blows, and their deafness to its course. Even in the passage about blindness, matters of hearing seem to be more reliable, although they are not in the forefront of the subject matter of the conversation, and are more elusive. At first reading, it is a story about blindness and sight, yet on further readings it is the ability to hear which makes the difference. The different levels of hearing in the conversation are the clue to its progression. Since the ultimate sin is unbelief in the works of God, there is a corresponding rise in intensity of conflict between good and evil whenever sin is mentioned. Thus far in the Gospel, chapter 9 has the largest segment of dialogue concerned with sin, longer than even Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus. In another piece of characterisation which associates Jesus with the blind man, the latter echoes his Lord's rhetorical tactics, picking up, on the Pharisees' words, twisting them, and throwing them back. When he says 'We know that God does not listen to sinners', the narrator has by this point brilliantly shifted the sense of power and initiative in the gospel.

As has sometimes been remarked, the narrator here shows us one of the most appealing characters in the gospel; in contrast, in varying degrees, to Nicodemus, who both attracts some sympathy and some criticism. The blind man is used, though by the narrator to show how risky faith is. The depth of characterisation corresponds to the depth of the subject matter. The blind man's final confession of faith is : 'performative and auto-implicative. It brings about what it states - faith becomes a reality when the speaker confesses it; and it implies a course of action which corresponds to the commitment undertaken....The man does not formulate a doctrinal belief in the person of Jesus ; he merely says "I believe", which indicates a way of life'. ¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Servotte, John, p.49.

Chapter 9 deals with not just seeing but also hearing. It is concerned with perception and discernment, as well as their absence. It would have been very instructive to know how Jesus would have dealt with the healing of a deaf man, and how John might have treated it. At first sight this story is mainly about seeing, but in fact the primary sense organ throughout is the ear. The blind man appears to have already heard of Jesus, and 'calling' for witnesses takes place, for a debate on who really 'hears' God. Together, both senses seem to make for faith. 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is the one'.

This chapter takes its place among others which give different signals as to John's convictions about the relationship between signs and faith, between believing and knowing, between commitment and wavering. The evidence from chapter 9 would appear to be that signs have a role in encouraging faith, but they can also bring about credulity; and that faith is dependent on more than sights and signs, and some measure of hearing is involved. Sometimes it's like the chicken and the egg : does existing faith enable recognition of the signs, or do the signs evoke an initial if incomplete faith? In fact, the blind man's response is on a level comparable to that of the disciples in chapter 1, and the official in chapter 4, because he responds to Jesus' words before he has understood fully Jesus' identity. So the blind man does not represent those who subscribe to an insufficient signs-based faith. The response of the Samaritans to the woman at the well showed that faith could be engendered through hearing alone. Why some people do not believe is not something the evangelist explains except to make clear that sin stems from unbelief (cf. 8 : 42-47). The problem with those who put their trust in signs alone is that in this gospel, they never seem to move beyond that stage. the blind man has taken responsibility for his faith, and has risked its practice and public exposure. The more vulnerable characters in this Gospel are often the more reliable believers, in contrast to the more secure and well-protected.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Each of these three stories is written in order to develop the reader's belief in the Son of God. These stories can be utilised by the reader in finding a meaning which tells of and generates belief. The depth and complexity of the literary fabric enables the reader to experience, not just watch from afar, the dynamics of faith. The conflict between belief and unbelief in these texts leads the reader to make his own commitments. Reading these stories of belief is more akin to engaging in a dialogue with a constantly open-ended conclusion. Through the conflict of value positions, the reader is swept into the momentum of choosing for himself.

Each of these stories aims to persuade - to move the characters in the story, and the readers of the narrative. In each of them, witness to Jesus will be insufficient, unreliable, if it is based solely on Jesus' signs. Witness can be trusted only if it is based on more than testimony to visible signs of God's glory. The complex web of repetition, association, irony and different viewpoints is one the reader feels forced to unravel. In each of these episodes, there is a 'pathos', or in more contemporary trends, human interest, element, which enables the readers to integrate their emotions and imaginations with their intellect, right brain and left brain. Nicodemus is the story of the public man gripped by private conflict; the Samaritan woman is the one who is overstepping the boundaries of 'normal' experience; the blind man is abandoned until rescued by the Son of God. Each of these stories also involves moving - from inside to outside, from private to public, from secrecy to openness, or vice versa. Through dynamics such as this the claims about Jesus' credibility as God's Son and messenger are tested. Our brief insertion into the world of these characters and their thoughts leaves us with the unfinished business of finding out what belief means and where it leads. Only brief is our encounter with each of these characters; and their exits from the narrative always leave questions unanswered.

John brings together an unusual collection of characters. You could compare this gospel with the Wizard of Oz : a little girl trying to go home, a lion looking for courage, and a tin man in search of a heart. The three characters I have examined are like the others in the gospel: we do not know their age or physical characteristics, only their position in society and their encounter with Jesus. The conversations are realistic enough for them to convey something of

their individual character, yet the lack of defining details allows them to serve as types also. As I noted earlier, there is little direct interaction between these characters. Their closest connection lies in their encounter with Jesus. That shows that, on the level of characterisation, the dynamics of the gospel centre around Jesus, just as in terms of the gospel's themes, the theme of believing predominates, and also centres on Jesus. The interdependence of themes, plot and characterisation in this gospel is now much better understood thanks to narrative criticism. The reader is pushed towards responding to Jesus by the affective power of the plot. Having examined the variety of alternative responses, the reader can interact with the characters. Some degree of identification is possible, because of the author's strategies to stimulate attitudes in the reader. As the story develops, the reader can make an increasingly complex web of connections between the characters and the themes. In turn the reader can imagine himself as the Samaritan woman, the blind man, and Nicodemus, or any of the others. St. John allows the reader to participate in the process of finding his own convictions by comparing and contrasting himself with these characters. John conveys the struggle of believing and knowing.

The Gospel of John is not a philosophical treatise on belief. It is a narrative containing material pertinent to the issues surrounding a community of faith. John wishes to provoke and encourage faith, rather than to provide a neatly worked out exposition of the relationship between faith and experience. This relationship is solely communicated through stories about other people's struggles with faith. Evidently this gospel affirms the positive role of sensory experience in the origin of faith. It assigns a primary place to the perception of signs and basic experiences like seeing and hearing. Yet it makes clear that beyond these must come a deeper discernment. Out of this deeper level is born a personal relationship of trust. This is described as believing and knowing. Faith is the work of God, who draws the believer-to-be. After that, the human being is responsible for believing and growing in faith.

The world of faith in John's gospel is one characterised by personal commitment. It is a world where people use the maps of those who have gone before them, but still make the journey for themselves. and when they have made the journey, they fall down and worship in the end. As Polanyi suggested, God can only be known in commitment, in worship, and so religious understanding is a skill to be developed. Those who advance towards faith in John are those who manage to integrate clues to a higher

meaning in life through all levels of their existence. At each level, people strive towards and then commit themselves to what they can dimly sense but not wholly grasp. In ordinary perception, when patterns or shapes begin to attract our attention, a higher power of insight begins to develop. There are rhythms to these processes of discovery and creative guesswork, and John indicates these by his complex network of resonances between these and other characters. Those who see most are those who can move furthest beyond the normal categories of seeing.

Ultimately this gospel is of course centred on one character, Jesus. He operates with a keen sense of the value of tradition, but his life and teaching was a constant questioning of the tradition where it had settled down and lost meaning. Jesus as the rectifier of tradition was also the great discoverer, pointing always beyond himself. The history and traditions of his people had a meaning, and so had the lives of the human beings he knew, and there were clues in them to tell what the true meaning was. Jesus had a deep and lively intuitive insight into the hearts of men and women and the springs of human action. John shows the reader, and more than shows, allows that reader to enter fully into the process of believing in and knowing him, through his choice of narrative technique.

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