

The Fourth Gospel as a Textual Field of Meaning

Introduction

The Fourth Gospel is a textual field of meaning and it reinforces pressure on readers to differentiate appearance from intended meaning. No single interpretation can claim to have said the last word on the meaning of the Fourth Gospel's use of language, which may be considered as the most striking characteristic of this Gospel. The whole network of the Johannine literary devices and vocabulary is an expression of the Fourth Gospel's theological message and brings dissimilarities into dramatic play with the aim of ensuring Jesus' identity and to bond the reader with him. As the narrator himself states in Jn 20:30-31, he has chosen the material carefully and composed the Gospel for a specific purpose, namely, so that the readers may believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, and that through their personal faith in him they may have eternal life.

Any interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, therefore, needs to begin with the inseparability of story and theology/interpretation. This avowal does not dismiss the possible historical value of the events of Jesus' life in this Gospel. Instead, it acknowledges that the value of the events of the Johannine Jesus lies in their theological significance, that is, what they reveal about God by means of what Jesus says and does. It is the narrative itself that provides the basis of such an interpretation.

This work will probe into the question of how the process of reading the Fourth Gospel is a theological experience. The narrative of the Fourth Gospel is a medium that helps the reader to objectify the shared knowledge of the symbolic

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universe with the Fourth Evangelist. In order to understand what this Gospel says about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, one must attend carefully to how it tells the story.

A Spiritual Taste

Much has been written on the Fourth Gospel which has been “embraced by the arms of Christian piety”¹ to a far greater extent than the synoptic Gospels. Some admit that they have been “repelled”² by the Fourth Gospel, or at least concede its “fascinating”³ character. Others see it as the “maverick”⁴ Gospel or “an expression of a contemplative mentality.”⁵ Modern scholars speak of the Fourth Gospel as “poetic” or “charismatic history,”⁶ others of a “two-level drama.”⁷ On this view, the Fourth Gospel seems to be a heavily reinterpreted written text calling readers “to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20,31).⁸

It has long been noted that the Fourth Gospel occupies a unique place among the four canonical Gospels. The Fourth Gospel includes episodes not found in the synoptic Gospels, and it simply reads differently from the other three. The usual explanation for these differences is that the Fourth Gospel’s narrative of Jesus is more theologically coloured and less historically traditional than that of the synoptic Gospels.

¹ Godfrey C. Nicholson, *Death as Departure: The Johannine Descent-Ascent Schema*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, no. 63 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press 1983), 1.

² Paul S. Minear, *John: The Martyr’s Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), ix.

³ Maarten J. Menken, “The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: A Survey on Recent Research,” in *From Jesus to Jesus: Essays on Jesus and New Testament Christology in Honour of Martinus de Jonge*, ed. Martinus C. de Boer, Journal for the Study of New Testament Supplement Series no. 84 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 292.

⁴ Robert Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*, 2nd ed (Westminster: John Knox Press 1993).

⁵ Geert Hallböck, “The Gospel of John as Literature: Literary Readings of the Fourth Gospel,” in *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives; Essays from the Scandinavian Conference on the Fourth Gospel in Århus 1997*, eds. Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series no. 182, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 46.

⁶ Mark W. G., Stibbe, *John: Readings; A New Biblical Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 18-19.

⁷ J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon 1979), 24-36.

⁸ The edition of the Bible employed in the present work is the *New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (New York - Oxford, 1989).

Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider's publication in 1820 questioned to what extent one can consider the reliable portrait of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, an issue which he relates to the historical reliability of the synoptic Gospels.⁹ This book had a great influence on David Friedrich Strauss' *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, first published in 1835.¹⁰ Strauss mounts arguments against the credibility of the Fourth Gospel that eroded considerably the place of this Gospel within the historical-Jesus investigations. In this important publication, Strauss subjects the Fourth Gospel to detailed comparisons with the synoptic Gospels, illustrating how Jesus' discourses in the Fourth Gospel do not parallel those included in the synoptic Gospels. Instead, they rather resemble the idiom of the Evangelist.¹¹ Strauss, therefore, concludes "that the discourses of Jesus in John's Gospel are mainly free composition of the Evangelist."¹² As a rationalist, Strauss ascribes mythological origins rather than historical ones to the Fourth Gospel.¹³ His former professor, Ferdinand Christian Baur reinforced Strauss' work with his own contributions,¹⁴ and by the middle of the nineteenth century, the Fourth Gospel ahistoricity was well on the way to being established as the prevalent outlook among many biblical scholars. This outlook rendered the Fourth Gospel's content irrelevant and even misleading for the critical investigation of the historical Jesus.

⁹ Carl Gottlieb Bretschneider, *Probabilia de Evangelii et Epistolarum Joannis Apostoli, Indole et Origine Eruditorum Iudiciis modeste Subjectis* (Leipzig: Barth, 1820), vii, 113, quoted by Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 85-86, writes: "It is accordingly quite impossible that both the Jesus of the [first] three Gospels and that of the Fourth can at the same time be historically true, since there is the greatest difference between them, not only in the manner of discourse but also in the argumentation and the behavior of the two; it is also quite incredible that the first evangelist invented Jesus' practices, teachings, and method of interpretation; but it is quite believable that the author of the Fourth Gospel could have created his Jesus."

¹⁰ David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. George Eliot (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 384.

¹² *Ibid.*, 386. Strauss, however, also adds: "we have admitted that he has called several sayings of Jesus from an authentic tradition."

¹³ For an excellent examination of Strauss' publications and the effect of his thought on other scholars see Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: First Complete Edition*, ed. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2000), originally published in German, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913).

¹⁴ See Ferdinand Christian Bauer, *Kritische Untersuchungen über die kanonischen Evangelien, ihr Verhältnis zueinander, ihren Character und Ursprung* (Tübingen: Ludwig Friedrich Fues, 1847). See also Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 110-113.

8 MELITA THEOLOGICA

As early as the second century, Clement of Alexandria had already observed that the Fourth Gospel's composition seems more "spiritual" than the other three.¹⁵ With reference to Clement's words, in his commentary which he did not manage to finish before he died, Edwyn C. Hoskyns writes:

Say that there is both historical reminiscence and spiritual interpretation of this book, and no doubt we are right; but go on and demand that the critic ... shall separate the history from the interpretation, and we force [the critic] to give up the attempt in despair, for the author of this book has set up a barricade across this road.¹⁶

Hoskyns then proceeds to define his commentary on the Fourth Gospel in line with this reading of the Gospel: "The purpose of this commentary is also to barricade the roads which lead to a disentangling of history and interpretation."¹⁷ The how and why the Fourth Gospel's theology and history form a web of related questions and perspectives that ultimately control the interpretation of this Gospel. Like the composition of the Fourth Gospel, its interpretation must be carried out in the tension between what the text presents and what the text means. The Fourth Evangelist accomplishes this "spiritual feel" by employing a unique vocabulary which is dense and often perplexing.

Words as a Means of Revelation

In spite of its many differences from the synoptic Gospels, the Fourth Gospel purports to tell the story of Jesus, whose status as the Messiah, the Son of God, and revealer of the Father, constitutes the first major theme. This picture of Jesus emanates from the narrative through a number of literary strategies. Such is the description of titles given to Jesus, such as *Logos* and *Light* in the Prologue.¹⁸ At the very beginning of the narrative, John the Baptist calls Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29,36). Later, Andrew one of the first two disciples who followed Jesus, calls him: "Messiah" (v.41), while Nathanael acclaims Jesus as "Son of God ... the King of Israel!" (v.49).

¹⁵ "But, John, last of all, perceiving that what had reference to the body in the gospel of our Savior, was sufficiently detailed, and being encouraged by his familiar friends, and urged by the spirit, he wrote a spiritual gospel." Quoted in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.14.7. See Eusebius, *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. Christian Frederic Cruse (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 205.

¹⁶ Edwyn C. Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. N. Davey (London: Faber & Faber 1947), 129.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁸ See Jn 1:1-18.

Contrary to the synoptic Gospels, no “messianic secret” keeps the reader guessing about Jesus’ identity.¹⁹ The Johannine Jesus speaks openly about his identity, origin and destiny. He is presented as the Divine Logos, the only agent of God in creation;²⁰ and as the one sent from above by God.²¹ He claims to be one with the Father,²² and that he came from the Father.²³ His divine status is revealed through the claims he makes;²⁴ the images he uses in the “I am” sayings by which he defines his self-identity;²⁵ and the miracles he performs described in this Gospel as “signs.”

The way the story is told challenges the reader to ask what are the implications of this portrayal of Jesus’ status. The answer to this question is the human response to Jesus. All the characters mentioned in the Fourth Gospel’s narrative are faced with a final choice between stark alternatives: salvation or condemnation. This alternative forms part of the dualistic ideology which permeates throughout the whole narrative. Various symbols are therefore employed to express this dualistic Johannine language, such as those who “see” and those who are “blind,”²⁶ and the stark division between “light” and “darkness.”²⁷ This dualistic language includes a strong polemic against “the Jews” who feature prominently in this narrative.²⁸ Many Johannine scholars, in fact, struggle to show that the term “the Jews” in this Gospel must be distinguished from the Jewish people in general.²⁹

¹⁹ The secrecy of the identity of Jesus, which is named by William Wrede as *Messiasgeheimnis*, is a traditional motif developed by Mark in his Gospel and shows that Jesus, though being Messiah, tried to keep his identity secret during his earthly life. See William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret*, trans. J.C.G. Creig (London: Clarke & Co Ltd, 1971). See also Heikki Räisänen, *The “Messianic Secret” in Mark’s Gospel*, trans. Christopher Tuckett (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990).

²⁰ See Jn 1:1-3.

²¹ See Jn 3:31-35; 6:33-35.

²² See Jn 10:30.

²³ See Jn 5:37; 6:44; 8:16, 8; 12:49; 14:24.

²⁴ See Jn 3:13; 5:17,19-24.

²⁵ See Jn 6:35; 8:12; 10:7,11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1.

²⁶ See Jn 9:39-41.

²⁷ See Jn 3:19-21; 12:35-36.

²⁸ Among the passages in which “the Jews” feature as the opponents of Jesus see Jn 5:10-18; 7:1,10-13; 8:48-59; 9:18-34; 10:31-39; 18:28-32; 19:13-16.

²⁹ For further reading on the subject see the essays in Reimund Bieringer, Didier Pollefeyt, and Frederique Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, eds., *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001). See also John Ashton, “The Jews in John,” in *Studying John: Approaches to the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 36-70; Johannes Beutler, *Judaism and the Jews in the Gospel of John*, Subsidia Biblica no. 30 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006), especially 145-151.

The reader of this Gospel is to follow the Evangelist's lead as the theological language is found in a narrative form. The coming of the Word of God in the flesh, is a revelatory reality that has nothing symbolical about it except the words that are being used to describe it. The verb "to come" (*erchomai*) is used symbolically or theologically to describe the mission of the Son of God: "I have come in my Father's name" (Jn 5:43). The verb "descend" (*katabaino*) is also used to describe the same reality: "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (3:13).³⁰ In the same manner, the verb "send" (*pempo - apostello*)³¹ indicates the mission of Jesus in relation with his "descent" from heaven. It emerges that Jesus is from above and his true place of abode is with the Father.³² Much of the Fourth Gospel's irony is built on the inability of the various Johannine characters to understand what Jesus means when he says that he is from God and that he is one with God.

The relationship between Jesus, as the Son of God, and the Father, serves as a model for the believer's relationship with Jesus, and through him, with God. This relationship is expressed in Johannine terms, such as, "to abide" (*meno*) and to "to seek" (*zeteo*). Such terms form part of the Fourth Gospel's distinctive narrative technique, in the way that certain words and concepts are given new theological connotations to achieve effects that cause surprise.

The theology of the Fourth Gospel, thus, evolves as an effort to bring out the meaning of everything in terms of the incarnate *Logos* which confronts readers at the very onset of the Gospel. The "Word" is a title that designates Jesus as the Revealer of the Father.³³

³⁰ Jesus' "descending" and "ascending" forms part of the "journey theme" in the Fourth Gospel. These two words characterize the mission of Jesus.

³¹ Some Johannine scholars see a distinction in meaning between these two verbs. See for e.g. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (London: John Murray, 1908), 294, 298; Calvin R. Mercer, "Apostellein and Pempein in John," *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 619-624. A number of other scholars, however, argue that there is no distinction in the use of these two verbs in the Fourth Gospel. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Two Johannine Verbs for Sending: A Study of John's Use of Words with Reference to General Linguistic Theory," in *Linguistics in the New Testament: Critical Junctures*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, Journal for the Study of New Testament: Supplement Series, no. 168 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 125-143; Charles Kingsley Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), 569.

³² See Jn 16:28.

³³ There is a vast literature regarding the meaning of *Logos* in the Fourth Gospel. See e.g. Elizabeth Harris, *Prologue and Gospel: The Theology of the Fourth Evangelist*, Journal for the Study of New Testament: Supplement Series, no. 107 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).

The Word is God's way of communicating. Through the Word, God creates and addresses the world. The evangelist also says that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (1:14). In Jesus of Nazareth, God's Word encounters people in an embodied human life. This makes God's Word uniquely accessible to human beings, since flesh is what all people share (17:2). The Word meets human beings in human terms. He makes God known by the words he speaks, the actions he performs, and the death he dies.³⁴

The central character of the theme of Revelation in the Fourth Gospel opens our eyes to the vocabulary of the word, such as *logos*, *legein*, *lalein*, *rhema*. If Jesus is presented as the Revealer, this should not be understood in the paradoxical way that Rudolf Bultmann conceived it, namely, "that the Revealer came to earth to say one thing and one thing only - *that* he is the Revealer. In this particular parcel there is nothing to unpack: it is empty."³⁵ Any examination of the word urges us to explicate its object.

First of all, Jesus often speaks about his *own* word (*ho emos logos*). This way of expressing himself is quite surprising if we compare it to that of the Synoptics. We may take just one example: "those who are ashamed of *me* and of *my words*, ... of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed" (Mk 8:38). This text puts on the same level, and almost identifies, the word "me" and "my words." The same emphasis on the *word of Jesus* is also found in the Fourth Gospel: "If you continue in *my word*, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:31-32). To remain or abide in Jesus' words, then, is the means how one becomes his disciple and discover the truth, that is, the mystery of his person.³⁶ The theme of the word is absolutely related to the person of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel.³⁷ His words are not only a message which he proclaims,

³⁴ Craig R. Koester, "Jesus' Resurrection, the Signs, and the Dynamics of Faith in the Gospel of John," in *Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John*, ed. Craig R. Koester and Reimund Bieringer, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, no. 222 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 47.

³⁵ See John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 63.

³⁶ There is a similar emphasis on the word of Jesus in the following verses: "There is no place in you for *my word*" (Jn 8:37); "you cannot accept *my word*" (v.43); "whoever keeps *my word* ..." (v.51).

³⁷ See Carlo Maria Martini, "Osservazioni sulla teologia della predicazione nell'opera giovannea," in *San Giovanni: Atti della XVIII Settimana Biblica* (Brescia: Paideia, 1964), 119: "Se chiediamo agli scritti giovannei quali sono queste 'parole' da ascoltare e da conservare, questo 'discorso' che viene testimoniato e nel quale occorre rimanere, vediamo come tutto si riferisce costantemente alla persona di Gesù e alla fede in lui. Gesù è in definitiva per s. Giovanni l'oggetto del discorso del Padre e della sua testimonianza, la parola da ascoltare e in cui rimanere, e la fede in lui costituisce, insieme con l'amore fraterno, l'unico precetto da osservare."

but they reveal something about the mystery of his person.³⁸

In the course of the Gospel narrative, the meaning of the *Word* incarnate is expressed linguistically as, say, a conversation. Such are the episodes of the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus³⁹ and with the Samaritan woman.⁴⁰ We also read about Jesus' giving a command, such as the commandment of love.⁴¹ The meaning of the *Word* incarnate expressed linguistically is also manifested in those moments when the Fourth Evangelist presents Jesus praying⁴² or asking a question. Such is the case with Jesus' first words in the Fourth Gospel, when Jesus asks the first two disciples who followed him: "what do you search?" (1:38). In a similar way, the first words of the Risen Jesus addressed to Mary Magdalene are also presented in the form of another question: "Whom do you search?" (20:15).

Michael Newheart neatly sums up Jesus' words under three categories.⁴³ First, Jesus uses various sensory images, such as bread, water, light, and the vine, which all have positive associations for the reader. In his speech, Jesus applies these images to himself, often through "I am" sayings.⁴⁴ Secondly, Jesus' words are also drawn from the world of human relationships. He therefore describes his relationship with God by naming God as Father, and by calling himself the Son.⁴⁵ Thirdly, Jesus also uses spatial imagery to bring the reader into relationship

³⁸ On this argument see Ignace de la Potterie, "Cristo centro della forma della Rivelazione secondo S. Giovanni," in *Studi di cristologia giovannea*, 3rd ed. (Genova: Marietti, 1992), 261-278.

³⁹ See Jn 3:1-21.

⁴⁰ See Jn 4:1-32.

⁴¹ See Jn 13:34.

⁴² See Jn 17.

⁴³ See Michael Newheart, "Toward a Psycho-literary Reading of the Fourth Gospel," in *What is John?*, vol.1: *Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series, no. 3 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), 52-53.

⁴⁴ The Greek phrase "I am" as applied to Jesus is used twenty-five times in the Fourth Gospel. See Jn 4:26; 6:20; 6:35,41,48,51; 8:12,18,23 (twice), 24,28,58; 10:7,9,11,14; 11:25; 13:19; 14:6; 15:1,5; 18:5,6,8. Among these there are seven "I am" sayings in the Fourth Gospel which fall under the so-called "definitive declarations": "I am the bread of life" (6:35,41,48); "I am the light of the world" (8:12); "I am the door of the sheep" (10:7,9); "I am the good shepherd" (10:11,14); "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25); "I am the way and the truth and the life" (14:6); "I am the vine (or true vine)" (15:1,5). A good presentation of the "I am" sayings in the Fourth Gospel is provided by D. M. Ball, *"I Am" in John's Gospel: Literary Function, Background, and Theological Implications*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series, no. 124 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Larry Kreitzer, *The Gospel According to John*. Regent's Study Guides, no. 1 (Oxford: Flair Press, 1990), 87-98.

⁴⁵ For a good treatment on this subject see, Leander E. Keck, "Derivation as Destiny: 'Oneness' in Johannine Christology, Anthropology, and Soteriology," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Clifton C. Black (Louisville:

with him. He says that he came from above, and thus he is not of this world.⁴⁶ At the hour of Jesus' glorification, he returns to Sender through death, resurrection, and ascension. As Fernando F. Segovia points out, this cosmic journey of the *Word* provides the overall framework for the plot of the Fourth Gospel.⁴⁷

We may therefore say that Jesus' words are a means by which he enters into a relation with the readers. These very words operate as the medium of revelation within the Fourth Gospel's narrative while they convey Jesus to the readers in ways that are designed to evoke and sustain faith.⁴⁸

Jesus is a character in this story that is being told, an actor in the history that is being recounted, but he is also the voice that moves this story beyond the limits of history. In the Fourth Gospel, the narrative voice of Jesus guides the reader into and through the 'problem' of history and theology.⁴⁹

A Distinctive Vocabulary

The readers of the Fourth Gospel are thus alerted not to be deceived by what seems to be so simple on the surface level of this Gospel. One of the most striking features of this Gospel's vocabulary is its deceptive simplicity that is exceptionally limited to 1,011 different words with only 112 of these words occurring once in the New Testament.⁵⁰ This means that the Fourth Gospel's vocabulary forms

Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 274-288. See also Mark L. Appold, *The Oneness Motif in the Fourth Gospel: Motif Analysis and Exegetical Probe into the Theology of John*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2/1 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1976).

⁴⁶ See Jn 8:23; 17:14,16. For further reading on this subject see William Loader, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Structure and Issues*, Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie, no. 23 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989).

⁴⁷ Fernando F. Segovia, "The Journey(s) of the Word of God: A Reading of the Plot of the Fourth Gospel," in *The Fourth Gospel from a Literary Perspective*, ed. Alan R. Culpepper and Fernando F. Segovia, *Semeia* no. 53 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991), 33. See also, Johannes Beutler, "Jesus on the Way to Galilee: The Movement of the Word in John 1-4," in *Melita Theologica: Journal of the Faculty of Theology* 62, no. 1-2 (2012): 7-22.

⁴⁸ Segovia, "The Journey(s) of the Word of God," 33. See also Gail O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress 1986), 22-32.

⁴⁹ Gail O'Day, "The Word Became Flesh: Story and Theology in the Gospel of John," in *What is John?*, vol. 2: *Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series, no. 7 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 76.

⁵⁰ James Hope Moulton and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 4, *Style* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), 76. Matthew has 1,691, Mark has 1,345, while Luke has 2,055 different words. For more information and such statistical checks see also, Robert Morgenthaler, *Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes* (Zürich: Gotthelf, 1958).

just 6.5 percent of the 15,416 words found in the Gospel material. The choice of these words is undoubtedly distinctive to this Gospel, and even though it is very limited, “the reader never receives the impression of an ill-equipped writer at a loss for the right word.” The impression is rather “that of a teacher who is confident that his message can be summed up in a few fundamental propositions which he has learnt to express with studied economy of diction.”⁵¹

Words taken from everyday life, such as *light, darkness, love, truth, and death* are “gradually built up over the course of the narrative, until, by the end, they are changed with an astounding depth of meaning.”⁵² For this reason, Robert Kysar introduces a survey of Johannine scholarship by observing that the Fourth Gospel “is a book in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim.”⁵³ This means that those who read the Fourth Gospel for the first time often find its meaning to be rather obvious and straightforward, while those who try to delve in its complexity and richness find themselves wrestling with its subtlety.

The crux of the matter lies in the surprising fact that reading the Fourth Gospel involves more than one level of meaning. The Fourth Gospel is a textual field of meaning. R. Alan Culpepper is but one of many voices who calls attention to the deeper meaning of the Gospel’s sub-surface level:

It is the discovery of sub-surface signals which had previously escaped the reader’s notice that allows the gospel to be read again and again with pleasure and profit. Traffic on the gospel’s subterranean frequencies is so heavy that even the perceptive reader is never sure he or she has received all the signals the text is sending.⁵⁴

The sub-surface signals which Culpepper mentions here form part of the peculiar character of the Johannine language. They function within complex literary devices, encompassing recurring themes, such as *light, darkness, and life*. They also include metaphors and symbols, such as, *shepherd, vine, and water*, while they also comprise the use of ambiguous words or expressions of double meaning. Such is the use of the word *another* in Jesus’ answer to Nicodemus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born *another*, one cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3). While Nicodemus understands the birth *another* in the sense

⁵¹ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 7.

⁵² Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1999), 27.

⁵³ Robert Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), 6.

⁵⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 151.

of being born again,⁵⁵ Jesus was in fact referring to a birth from above or in the Spirit.⁵⁶

Another well known case of double-entendre is the meaning of the word “living water,” acted out in Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman. Whereas the woman refers to the water in the literal sense, Jesus was speaking about the kind of water that will quench thirst forever.⁵⁷ Even the reader remains in the dark until Jn 7, when he learns that the living water welling up from one’s innermost being refers to the Spirit.⁵⁸ Similarly, in the episode of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus tells his disciples that he is in possession of some *food (brosis - bromia)* which is unknown to them.⁵⁹ The reference to the food here forms another example of the double-meaning which leads to misunderstanding on the part of the disciples who understood the word to mean physical nourishment. Jesus, however, interprets it in terms of his obedience to the Father who sent him.⁶⁰

In other instances we also encounter the use of double-meaning words by which the Fourth Evangelist does not seem to invite the reader to choose one over the other. Instead, he seems to be insisting on more than one meaning. Thus, for example, in 13:1 and 19:28,30 the use of *telos* and *teleo* respectively seems to imply both “completion or fulfillment” and “end.”⁶¹ Kysar goes even further to say that “the entire Gospel of John might be considered an extended metaphor.”⁶² In this sense, the Fourth Gospel’s narrative “invites us to think how it has ‘transcendent significance.’”⁶³ A similar comment comes from Charles Harold Dodd when he writes that “narrative and discourse” in the Fourth Gospel are “bound together by an intricate network of symbolism.”⁶⁴ In this way, even

⁵⁵ See Jn 3:4.

⁵⁶ See Jn 3:5-8.

⁵⁷ See Jn 4:14.

⁵⁸ See Jn 7:38-39.

⁵⁹ See Jn 4:32.

⁶⁰ See Jn 4:34.

⁶¹ A more elaborate discussion on the use of double meaning words in the Fourth Gospel see E. Richard, “Expressions of Double Meaning and their Function in the Gospel of John,” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 96-112; see also R. Shedd, “Multiple Meanings in the Gospel of John,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 247-258.

⁶² Robert Kysar, “Johannine Metaphor-Meaning and Function: A Literary Case Study of John 10: 1-18,” in *The Fourth Gospel from a Literary Perspective*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper, 99.

⁶³ Robert Kysar, *Preaching John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 88.

⁶⁴ Charles Harold Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1953), 143.

the Johannine miracles, described in this Gospel as “signs,” reinforce pressure on readers to differentiate appearance from intended meaning.⁶⁵ Yet, extreme caution when approaching Johannine symbolism is encouraged.⁶⁶

The application of literary criticism, which focuses more closely on the narrative text as it stands, has helped the readers of the Fourth Gospel to consider the inadequate apparent meaning of these literary devices. Through symbolization, misunderstanding and irony, the narrative enables the readers to comprehend what the characters in the narrative fail to understand. At the same time, these literary devices engage the reader in a process by which he or she mounts “again and again to the higher plateau of meaning.”⁶⁷

Such are the provisions the narrative makes on its readers that most Johannine scholars discard what Jeffrey Staley’s calls, “the victimization of the implied reader,”⁶⁸ that is, “a strategy designed to humble those real readers who feel that they are on the inside track.”⁶⁹ Instead, the use of these literary devices in the Fourth Gospel leads the reader into the circle of privileged insiders. In Culpepper’s words: “Never is the reader the victim of irony.”⁷⁰ The relationship between readers and the implied author is one of the strongest effects of Johannine double-entendre. “In the hands of others irony becomes a sword, but in the hands of our author it is more like a net in which readers are caught and drawn to the Evangelist’s theology and faith.”⁷¹

Such approaches, however, raise questions about what may be considered a “valid” reading: are all meanings discovered by a reader equally acceptable - and if so, how can one talk of anything being “biblical” at all? One is sometimes reminded of Humpty-Dumpty: “When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty says in a rather insulting tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor

⁶⁵ See the discussion in Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible Series, no. 29, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 525-532.

⁶⁶ For further reading on the use and meaning of symbolism in the Fourth Gospel see Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1995); Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Herder & Herder 2002).

⁶⁷ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 199.

⁶⁸ The phrase was introduced into Johannine studies by Jeffrey L. Staley, *The Print’s First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, no. 82 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988). On page 95, n.1, Staley attributes the phrase to John B. McKee, *Literary Irony and the Literary Audience: Studies in the Victimization of the Reader in Augustan Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1974).

⁶⁹ Staley, *The Print’s First Kiss*, 105, n. 48

⁷⁰ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 179.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

less.” It also reminds us of Alice’s response, “The question is”, says Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”⁷²

Conclusion

The theology of the Fourth Gospel evolves as an effort to bring out the meaning of everything in terms of the Incarnate *Logos* who confronts the readers at the very onset of the Gospel. The underlying response, known as “belief” in the Johannine idiom, means to commit oneself to a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. Words from and about Jesus come to the readers through the text of the Gospel. These words are essential in fostering faith in the characters mentioned in the narrative. In this way, these words convey Jesus to the readers in ways that are designed to evoke and sustain faith.

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⁷² Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 87.

