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Introduction

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

People are interested in people and like to hear their stories. The appeal of a good novel, movie, or biography is that it draws us into the story so that we identify with one or more of the characters. Some authors write simply to entertain readers, while others write in order to persuade their readers of a particular viewpoint. The author of John's Gospel falls in the latter category.[6] John explicitly states his purpose in 20:30-31:

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

6. I contend that the author of this Gospel is the Beloved Disciple, whom I tentatively identify as John the son of Zebedee (see chapter 22 below).

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

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

There is another important rationale for this book. In the last thirty-odd years, there has been an increased interest in the Bible as literature and story. Literary methods have been applied to John's Gospel mainly in the form of narrative criticism and reader-response criticism and have proven fruitful. John's Gospel, then, is the story of Jesus Christ—a story with a plot, events, and characters. While much has been written on events and on the logical or causal sequence of events called "plot," character appears to be the neglected child. There is no comprehensive theory of character in either literary theory or biblical criticism, and therefore no consensus among scholars on how to analyze and classify characters. Elsewhere, I have developed a comprehensive theory of character in New Testament narrative that I am applying in this book.[7] As we will see, most scholars view the Johannine characters as one-dimensional ("types") and unchanging.

7. Bennema, *Theory of Character*. Below, I provide a summary of my theory.

This book aims to provide a fresh analysis of the Johannine characters and their responses to Jesus, showing that many characters are more complex, round, and developing than most scholars would have us believe.

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

Previous Studies on Johannine Character

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

One of the earliest treatises on Johannine characters is an article from 1956 by *Eva Krafft*.[8] Influenced by Rudolf Bultmann's commentary on John, she argues that John made his characters typically transparent and that they personify a certain attitude to

8. Krafft, "Die Personen," 18–32.

Jesus. In 1975, *Raymond E. Brown* examined John's Gospel to determine the roles of women in the Johannine community.[9] Except for Martha's role of serving at the table (12:2), a possible allusion to the office of deacon that already existed in the late 90s, Brown contends that the other passages are concerned with the general position of women in the Johannine community. He concludes that discipleship is the primary Christian category for John and that women are included as first-class disciples. Next, *Raymond F. Collins* wrote a lengthy article on Johannine characters in 1976 (reprinted in 1990), and added a second essay in 1995.[10] He argues that the various characters in John's Gospel represent a particular type of faith-response to Jesus; they are cast in a representative role and serve a typical function.[11] Krafft's, Brown's, and Collins's descriptions of the characters are not very detailed and they do not classify the characters or their responses to Jesus. The reader is left with a collection of unconnected character descriptions since their studies are neither preceded by guidelines on how to analyze character nor followed by an evaluation of how the various characters relate to one another. I also question whether John's characters are as "transparent" or "definitely typecast" as Krafft and Collins would have us believe.

In her study of women in John's Gospel, *Sandra M. Schneiders* concludes that (i) all the women in John's Gospel are presented positively and in intimate relationship to Jesus; (ii) nevertheless, John's positive portrayal of women is neither one-dimensional nor stereotypical; (iii) the women play unconventional roles.[12] A year later, in 1983, *Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* produced her landmark study in which she briefly looked at women in John's Gospel.[13]

9. R. Brown, "Roles of Women," 688–99.
10. Collins, "Representative Figures," 1–45; Collins, "John," 359–69.
11. Collins, "Representative Figures," 8; Collins, "John," 361.
12. Schneiders, "Women," 35–45.
13. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 323–33.

Although she does not undertake in-depth character studies, she argues that Jesus' mother, the Samaritan woman, Martha and Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene are paradigms of women's apostolic and ministerial leadership in the Johannine communities, as well as paradigms of true discipleship for all believers (cf. Brown).

The 1980s also witnessed the first book-length treatment of John's Gospel as a literary work with *R. Alan Culpepper*'s seminal work *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel,* in which he devotes one chapter to Johannine characters.[14] He provides a short theoretical discussion of characterization, arguing that John draws from both Greek and Hebrew models of character, although most Johannine characters represent particular ethical types (as in Greek literature). Using the modern character classifications of literary critics E. M. Forster and W. J. Harvey,[15] Culpepper, like Collins, contends that most of John's minor characters are "the personification of a single trait" and are "typical characters easily recognizable by the readers."[16] For Culpepper, the Johannine characters are particular kinds of choosers: "Given the pervasive dualism of the Fourth Gospel, the choice is either/or. *All* situations are reduced to two clear-cut alternatives, and *all* the characters eventually make their choice."[17] He then produces, in relation to John's ideological point of view, an extensive taxonomy of belief-responses in which a character can progress or regress from one response to another.[18]

Culpepper describes almost all the relevant Johannine characters, but his characterization is sketchy because his aim is to explore the entire literary "anatomy" of John's Gospel, of which characterization

14. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 99–148. Culpepper does interact with Krafft and Collins.
15. For Forster and Harvey's character classifications, see Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 45–46.
16. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 102–4.
17. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 104 (emphasis added).
18. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 145–48.

is merely one (though an important) aspect. His presentation of John's characters may also be too simplistic: Does Nicodemus make a clear choice? Are Peter and Pilate typical characters, easily recognizable? Is Thomas simply the doubter? More importantly, Culpepper does not classify the characters themselves but only their responses, thereby reducing the characters to their typical responses and hence to types.[19] Besides, his taxonomy of belief-responses appears to imply ranking or comparison, which raises questions: Is the response of belief in Jesus' words (the Samaritan woman, the royal official) superior or inferior to that of commitment in spite of misunderstandings (the disciples)?

Examining the roles and functions of women in John's Gospel, *Turid Karlsen Seim* observes that these women are presented independent of men and that they are almost always shown favorably.[20] Yet there is an impressive individual differentiation and originality such that each is presented as a person in her own right. Seim argues that the gender aspect is important in order to understand fully the role of women in John's Gospel.

Since the 1990s, many scholars have applied the principles of literary theory to John's Gospel, which explains the increasing interest in studying Johannine characters. For example, *Margaret Davies* undertook a comprehensive reading of John's Gospel, mainly using structuralism and reader-response criticism, and she dedicated one chapter to various Johannine characters.[21] She contends that most of the characters are flat caricatures, having a single trait and showing little or no development.[22] Her conclusions resemble those of Krafft,

19. While still viewing Johannine characters mainly as plot functionaries, Culpepper recently admits that they are more than their responses ("Weave of the Tapestry," 18–35).
20. Seim, "Roles of Women," 56–73.
21. Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference*, 316–49. Elsewhere she refers to the world, "the Jews," and Pilate (*Rhetoric and Reference*, 154–58, 313–15).
22. Davies, *Rhetoric and Reference*, 157, 332, 338.

Collins, and Culpepper, although surprisingly she does not interact with them.

Mark W. G. Stibbe's important work on characterization in John 8; 11; and 18–19 shows how narrative criticism can be applied to John's Gospel, and he was the first to present a number of characters, such as Pilate and Peter, as more complicated than had previously been assumed.[23] Stibbe provides brief theoretical considerations on characterization, stressing that readers must (i) construct character by inference from fragmentary information in the text (as in ancient Hebrew narratives); (ii) analyze characters with reference to history rather than according to the laws of fiction; and (iii) consider the Gospel's ideological point of view, expressed in 20:31.[24] In addition, throughout his commentary, Stibbe highlights how John portrays the various characters in his Gospel.[25]

In exploring the various love relationships in John's Gospel, *Sjef van Tilborg* pays attention to Jesus' mother, the Samaritan woman, Martha and Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene.[26] He argues that in the relationship between Jesus and his mother, she does not abandon her son and Jesus is the obedient son. When it comes to the other women in John's Gospel, however, van Tilborg finds a negative portrayal: in the beginning of each story Jesus is inviting and open to women but invariably there is a phase in the story where this openness dissipates and Jesus retreats from his relationship to women and returns to the male group.

In a detailed narratological analysis of John 13–17, *D. Francois Tolmie* also examines the characters in these chapters.[27] He undergirds

23. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, 97–99, 106–13, 119; Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 90–96, 121–25. Stibbe interacts with Culpepper but not with Krafft or Collins.
24. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, 24–25, 28; Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 10–11.
25. Stibbe, *John*.
26. Van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love*, chapter 1.1 and chapter 4.
27. Tolmie, *Jesus' Farewell*, 117–44.

his study with an extensive theoretical discussion. He follows the narratological model of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (who in turn draws on Seymour Chatman) and utilizes the character classification of Yosef Ewen but also refers to Forster, Harvey, and A. J. Greimas.[28] However, Tolmie only discusses contemporary fiction and does not consider character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature. The main weakness of his study is his use of various character classifications, concluding that the models of Greimas and Ewen are the most suitable for classifying characters.[29] I contend that Greimas's classification is *not* the best model to analyze characters since it concentrates on plot, thereby reducing characters to mere actants. Applying Ewen's nonreductionist classification, Tolmie, ironically, evaluates all characters (except God, Jesus, and the Spirit) as flat—they have a single trait or are not complex, show no development, and reveal no inner life.[30] Tolmie probably arrives at a reductionist understanding of the Johannine characters because he examines only a section of the Johannine narrative, John 13–17—although he briefly summarizes information from John 1–12. This is methodologically incorrect, and I contend that one must analyze the entire text continuum of the Gospel of John to reconstruct its characters.

Viewing the Gospel of John as a trial, *Robert G. Maccini* focuses on the subject of women as witnesses, looking at Jesus' mother, the Samaritan woman, Martha, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene.[31] Although Maccini admits that men also function as witnesses,[32] I believe his study would have been strengthened if he had studied women and men together. Due to his specific agenda, Maccini

28. Tolmie, *Jesus' Farewell*, 13–28, 117–24, 141–44. The literary theories of Rimmon-Kenan, Chatman, Ewen, Forster, Harvey, and Greimas regarding character in modern literature are explained in Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 44–46.
29. Tolmie, *Jesus' Farewell*, 141–44.
30. Tolmie, *Jesus' Farewell*, 142–43.
31. Maccini, *Her Testimony*.
32. Maccini, *Her Testimony*, 243–44.

provides no theoretical discussion of character and does not classify the characters or their responses.

Another specialized contribution comes from *David R. Beck*, who studies the concept of anonymity in relation to discipleship.[33] He argues that anonymity facilitates readers' identification with characters and that only the unnamed characters serve as models of appropriate responses to Jesus.[34] Beck also provides a brief theoretical discussion on character. Rejecting three methods of character analysis (Forster's psychological model, Greimas's structuralist approach, and Douwe Fokkema's semiotic approach), he adopts John Darr's model, which is influenced by the reader-oriented theory of Wolfgang Iser, and considers how characterization entices readers into fuller participation in the narrative.[35] Beck, however, overstates his case, thereby misreading various characters. First, contra Beck, the invalid at the pool in John 5 is not a model to be emulated since he does not heed Jesus' warning and instead reports him to the Jewish authorities, leading to Jesus' being persecuted (5:14–16). Second, Beck's attempt to squeeze the adulterous woman of 7:53–8:11 into his mold of paradigmatic discipleship (even though he admits that the narrative does not record her response or witness) is unconvincing. Third, why do the responses of Nathanael, Martha, and Thomas not constitute an appropriate belief-response (so Beck)—especially when their confessions closely resemble the ideal Johannine confession in 20:31? Fourth, named characters such as John (the Baptist) as the ideal witness to Jesus, Andrew as a finder of people, Peter as the shepherd in the making, and Mary, who expresses her affection for Jesus in an extraordinary devotional act, appear to depict aspects of true

33. Beck, *Discipleship Paradigm*. Beck's monograph builds on his earlier essay "Narrative Function," 143–58. Recently, Beck returned to the subject of anonymity ("'Whom Jesus Loved,'" 221–39).
34. Beck, *Discipleship Paradigm*, 1–2, 9, 137–42; Beck, "Narrative Function," 147, 155.
35. Beck, *Discipleship Paradigm*, 6–8. Beck spends most time discussing the concept of anonymity and readers' identification with characters (pp. 10–29).

discipleship. Thus, Beck is incorrect in his character analysis and too categorical in concluding that *only* the anonymous characters represent a paradigm of discipleship.

Like many others, *Adeline Fehribach* also examines the five women in John's Gospel—Jesus' mother, the Samaritan woman, Martha, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene—arguing that their primary function is to support the portrayal of Jesus as the messianic bridegroom.[36] She concludes that John's Gospel does not present a community of believers in which women are equal to men.[37] Her theoretical discussion of character is minimal, but she does draw on character types in the Hebrew Bible, Hellenistic-Jewish literature, and Greco-Roman literature in her analysis of Johannine women.[38] If she had studied all the Johannine characters, female and male, she would have discovered that *all* characters function in various ways as supports in the portrayal of Jesus; they all act as foils, enhancing the reader's understanding of Jesus' identity and mission. Besides, as we will see, Fehribach's understanding of the role of the Johannine women simply as advancing the plot and the portrayal of Jesus as the bridegroom is too reductionistic; they are important in their own right and fulfill larger roles than Fehribach ascribes to them. Finally, driven by a feminist agenda to expose the patriarchy and androcentrism of John's Gospel (and the culture of that time), she tends to detect more sexual connotations in John's Gospel than the text warrants.

Colleen M. Conway produced two important but very different works on Johannine characters. In her 1999 monograph, she looks at Johannine characterization from the perspective of gender, asking whether men and women are presented differently in the Gospel of

36. Fehribach, *Women*.
37. Fehribach, *Women*, 175–79.
38. Fehribach, *Women*, 15–17, passim.

John.[39] Analyzing five female and five male characters, she concludes that throughout John's Gospel women are presented positively while male characters present a different, inconsistent pattern—Nicodemus, Pilate, and Peter are depicted negatively; the man born blind and the Beloved Disciple positively.[40] Conway presents a brief overview of Johannine character studies but has not included the monographs of Tolmie and Beck.[41] She also provides an informed theoretical discussion of character in which she leans toward the contemporary theories of Chatman and Baruch Hochman, and includes Hebrew techniques of characterization (but leaves out character in ancient Greek literature).[42]

Conway's second contribution to Johannine characterization, in 2002, is more significant.[43] In this provocative article, she radically challenges the consensus view that the Johannine characters represent particular belief-responses. Criticizing this "flattening" of characters, she argues that Johannine characters contain varying degrees of ambiguity and do more to complicate the clear choice between belief and unbelief than to illustrate it. Rather than positioning the (minor) characters on a spectrum of negative to positive faith-responses, Conway claims that the minor characters appear unstable in relation to Jesus as if shifting up and down such a spectrum. In doing so, the characters challenge, undercut, and subvert the dualistic world of the Gospel because they do not line up on either side of the belief/unbelief divide.[44] Whether Conway's conclusion that the Johannine characters resist and undermine the binary categories of belief and unbelief can be sustained needs to be seen, but her argument that

39. Conway, *Men and Women*.
40. Conway, *Men and Women*, 69–205.
41. Conway, *Men and Women*, 42–47.
42. Conway, *Men and Women*, 50–63.
43. Conway, "Ambiguity," 324–41.
44. Conway, "Ambiguity," 339–40.

the minor characters are often presented as too simplistic may be true. Conway's observation that scholars often disagree about what belief-response each character typifies or represents—which is indeed surprising if the Johannine characters are as flat, typecast, and transparent as they suggest—certainly needs to be taken seriously.

Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger traces the female characters from the Synoptics that figure in John's Gospel but are not noticeable at a glance.[45] She contends that some text signals in the Nicodemus narratives open them up to Synoptic intertexts and hence relate Nicodemus to Synoptic women. For example, Nicodemus's question to Jesus, "How can this be?," relates to Mary's question, "How shall this be?," when the angel Gabriel announces the conception of Jesus. She also connects the Johannine story of Jesus' mother at the cross and the Lukan widow of Nain, in that both receive a son. She concludes that "interfigural encounters create a network of relationships, between characters in different texts, and between characters and readers reading characters."[46] Creative as her study may be, I contend that it lacks hermeneutical control. Besides, I seek to understand the Johannine characters as *John* constructed them rather than how they can be viewed through a Synoptic female lens.

In 2001, *James L. Resseguie* produced a monograph on point of view in the Gospel of John.[47] In his chapter on character study, he explores various characters from a material point of view and classifies them according to their dominance or social presence in society rather than their faith-response per se.[48] For example, Nicodemus, who represents the dominant culture, abandons his material perspective for a spiritual one, and the lame man, who represents the

45. Kitzberger, "Synoptic Women," 77–111.
46. Kitzberger, "Synoptic Women," 108–9.
47. Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*.
48. Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, 109–68.

marginalized of society, is freed from the constraints of the dominant culture and even acts counterculturally by violating the Sabbath.[49] Resseguie claims that the characters' material points of view contribute or relate to the Gospel's overall ideology.[50] However, I contend that the Gospel's overall ideology is soteriological in nature rather than sociological because it is directly related to the Gospel's salvific purpose (20:30–31) and worldview. Any evaluation of the characters' belief-responses to Jesus should therefore be in the light of the Gospel's soteriological point of view rather than their material or socioeconomic standing.

Craig R. Koester, in his chapter on characterization, also subscribes to the idea that each of John's characters represents a particular faith-response.[51] Koester's strength is that he interprets John's characters on the basis of the text and its historical context.[52] He sees many parallels between John's story and ancient Greek drama or tragedy, where characters are types who convey general truths by representing a moral choice.[53] However, Koester simply accepts Aristotle's view of character, whereas I have found that character in Greek tragedy could be more complex and round.[54] Moreover, many Johannine characters, such as Nicodemus, Peter, Judas, and Pilate, do not fit the category of type; they are more complex, ambiguous, and round.[55] Finally, Koester shows insufficient interaction with many others who have studied Johannine characters.

49. Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, 127, 137–38, 167.
50. Resseguie, *Strange Gospel*, 109–10.
51. Koester, *Symbolism*, 33–77.
52. See esp. Koester, *Symbolism*, 35.
53. Koester, *Symbolism*, 36–39.
54. Bennema, *Theory of Character*, chapter 2.
55. Koester perhaps provides a corrective when he says about the Johannine characters that "their representative roles do not negate their individuality but actually develop their most distinctive traits" (*Symbolism*, 35).

Ruth Edwards has devoted one chapter in her book to Johannine characters.[56] Although this chapter is short and sketchy, she recognizes that many Johannine characters are not stereotypical or "flat."[57] She, like Conway, is interested in whether John portrays women and men differently. However, while she touches on all the female characters, she neglects prominent male characters such as John (the Baptist), the lame man, and Pilate. She has also left out complex characters such as "the Jews," the crowd, and the world.

Margaret M. Beirne examines six gender pairs of characters—Jesus' mother and the royal official, Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, the man born blind and Martha, Mary of Bethany and Judas, Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdalene and Thomas—and concludes that women and men are equal in terms of the nature and value of discipleship.[58] Although her agenda is different from ours, Beirne's analysis of Johannine characters could nevertheless serve our purpose because she recognizes that

> these gender pairs serve as a foil for Jesus' ongoing self-revelation and demonstrate a range of faith responses with which the reader may identify. In order to thus engage the reader, and thereby fulfil the gospel's stated purpose (20.31), the evangelist has portrayed them not as mere functionaries, but as engaging and varied characters.[59]

Beirne repeatedly points out that, although many Johannine characters are representative of a particular belief-response, they are also characters in their own right and cannot be typecast or stereotyped.[60]

56. Edwards, *Discovering John*.
57. Edwards, *Discovering John*, 111.
58. Beirne, *Women and Men*.
59. Beirne, *Women and Men*, 219; cf. 25–26.
60. Beirne, *Women and Men*, 65, 101, 135, 167–68, 219. It is surprising that Beirne has missed Conway's 1999 monograph on the subject.

Jean K. Kim uses a postcolonial feminist perspective to explore the female characters in the Gospel of John.[61] She contends that the Johannine narrative is thoroughly patriarchal and needs to be deconstructed in order to reveal the partiality of the ideology inscribed in the text. She concludes that "the Johannine narrative can be seen as a nationalist male object whose story develops at the expense of female characters including both "good" women (e.g., the mother of Jesus, Mary, and Martha) and "bad," ambiguous, or hybrid women (e.g., the Samaritan woman, the adulterous woman, and Mary Magdalene)."[62] While most scholars who focus on the female characters in John's Gospel (R. Brown, Schneiders, Schüssler Fiorenza, Seim, Maccini, Fehribach, Conway, Edwards, Beirne) evaluate them positively, some evaluate them more negatively (van Tilborg, Fehribach, J. Kim). In my analysis of the female characters in John's Gospel, we will see that the conclusions of van Tilborg, Fehribach, and J. Kim cannot be sustained.[63]

Exploring the relationship between John's Gospel and ancient Greek tragedy, *Jo-Ann Brant* examines the Johannine characters against the backdrop of Greek drama.[64] For example, "the Jews" are not actors in the Johannine drama but function as the deliberating chorus in a Greek drama—a corporate voice at the sidelines, witnesses to the action. As such, the deliberation of "the Jews" and their response of unbelief provide the believing audience with an opportunity to look into the mind of the other, whose perspective it does not share. In this role as a collective, deliberating voice in the Johannine drama, "the Jews" should not be associated with any particular historical group in Judaism.[65] Drawing parallels with

61. Kim, *Woman and Nation*.
62. Kim, *Woman and Nation*, 223–24.
63. Cf. Beirne's critique of Fehribach (*Women and Men*, 8–9, 44–45 n. 8, 179 n. 34, 201 n. 21).
64. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 159–232.
65. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 178–87.

ancient Greek tragedy, Brant concludes that readers are not members of a jury, evaluating characters as right or wrong, innocent or guilty, or answering christological questions about Jesus' identity, but are called to join the Johannine author in commemorating Jesus' life.[66] According to her, "[i]nstead of asking, 'Who are the children of God?'—that is, inquiring about who is in and who is out—the question that the Fourth Gospel addresses seems to be, 'What does it mean to be children of God?'"[67] However, "the Jews" do function as a character that actively participates in the Johannine drama; contra Brant, "the Jews" hand Jesus over and then manipulate Pilate to pass the death sentence and thus achieve the premeditated outcome (11:47-53; 18:28—19:16). Besides, "the Jews" are not simply a literary construct that fulfills a particular role in the Johannine drama but a composite group with a historical identity (see chapter 5 below). Finally, Brant assumes that John's purpose for writing his Gospel is only to deepen the existing faith of believers, but we will see that the Gospel is also meant to persuade outsiders to believe in Jesus and thereby participate in the eternal life available in him.

James M. Howard explores how some of the minor characters (Jesus' mother, the royal official, the man born blind, the invalid, Mary and Martha of Bethany) contribute to the development of the plot and the purpose of John's Gospel.[68] Examining these minor characters and their responses to Jesus' miraculous signs, Howard concludes that, in line with John's purpose, each of the characters represents either belief or unbelief. Moreover, each character reveals the Messiah in a different way and reflects some degree of change (either positively or negatively) as a result of his or her encounter with Jesus. However, his findings do not go beyond the standard commentaries, and his

66. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 225–26, 259–60.
67. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 231.
68. Howard, "Significance of Minor Characters," 63–78.

portrayal of most characters is too reductionistic: for example, he concludes that the key trait of the royal official, Martha, and Mary is a "belief resulting from needs" and that the key trait of the blind man is "belief in the context of signs."[69]

In an introductory study of the Gospel of John, *Frances Taylor Gench* utilizes the church's lectionary to study thirteen central texts, some of which deal with various Johannine characters such as Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the woman accused of adultery, the man born blind, the Bethany family, and Pilate.[70] However, Gench provides no theoretical basis for how to approach character.

In 2009, at the same time as the first edition of my *Encountering Jesus* appeared, *Susan E. Hylen* produced an important work on Johannine characters.[71] She identifies the following problem in Johannine character studies: while the majority of interpreters read most Johannine characters as "flat"—embodying a single trait and representing a type of believer—the sheer variety of interpretations proves that it is difficult to evaluate John's characters (cf. Conway). She presents an alternative strategy for reading them, arguing that John's characters display various kinds of ambiguity. For example, Nicodemus's ambiguity lies in the uncertainty of what he understands or believes. On the other hand, the ambiguity of the Samaritan woman, the disciples, Martha, the Beloved Disciple, and "the Jews" lies in a belief in Jesus mixed with disbelief and misunderstanding. Finally, although Jesus' character is unambiguously positive, there is also ambiguity in the many metaphors John uses to characterize Jesus. I wonder, however, whether Hylen attributes more ambiguity to the Johannine characters than the author intended.

69. Howard, "Significance of Minor Characters," 77.
70. Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*.
71. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers*.

Also in 2009, *Christopher W. Skinner's* work appeared.[72] After providing a theoretical discussion of character in his chapter 2, he uses misunderstanding as a lens through which to view the Johannine characters. On the premise that the Prologue is the greatest source of information about Jesus, Skinner contends,

> Each character in the narrative approaches Jesus with varying levels of understanding but no one approaches him fully comprehending the truths that have been revealed to the reader in the prologue. Thus, it is possible for the reader to evaluate the correctness of every character's interaction with Jesus on the basis of what has been revealed in the prologue.[73]

Examining six male characters (Thomas, Peter, Andrew, Philip, Judas [not Iscariot], and Nicodemus), three female characters (the Samaritan woman, Martha, and Mary), and one male character group (the twelve disciples), Skinner shows that all Johannine characters are uncomprehending to a degree.

Nicolas Farelly undertakes a narratological analysis of the disciples as a group and of some individual disciples in John's Gospel (Peter, Judas, Thomas, the Beloved Disciple, and Mary Magdalene). Much of his study is dominated by the question of how the reader is expected to respond to the characterization of the disciples, and Farelly contends that implied readers learn about characters primarily through discovering their role in the plot.[74] Consequently, he explores the relationship between plot and character, concluding that characters are more than mere plot functionaries: "characters do 'exist' to serve specific plot functions . . . but they do not lose their impact as constructed persons."[75] Finally, Farelly discusses the

72. Skinner, *John and Thomas*.
73. Skinner, *John and Thomas*, 37.
74. Farelly, *Disciples in the Fourth Gospel*, 7–8.
75. Farelly, *Disciples in the Fourth Gospel*, 164–67 (quotation from p. 167).

readers' participation in the narrative through identification with the characters, which includes both involvement and distancing because the world of the narrative is like and unlike the world of the readers.[76]

In a monograph on the characterization of the Johannine Jesus, *Alicia D. Myers* uses categories of ancient rhetorical practices of characterization, as found in Greco-Roman rhetorical handbooks and various *progymnasmata*.[77] She argues that ancient authors used common topoi or "topics" and rhetorical techniques to construct "typical" characters in order to persuade their audiences to either imitate a character's virtues or avoid that character's vices. She stresses that in Greco-Roman antiquity, characters were consistent or predictable in order to be credible.[78] With this theoretical grounding, she explores how John's use of Scripture contributes to the characterization of Jesus. Myers's work is significant because she is the first to use ancient characterization techniques.[79]

In 2013, two important collections of essays on Johannine characters appeared. One volume, edited by *Christopher W. Skinner*, features seven essays on methods or models for reading Johannine characters, followed by seven essays on specific Johannine characters (God, John the Baptist, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Martha and Mary, the Beloved Disciple, and Pilate).[80] Unfortunately, there is no clear connection between the two parts in this volume. It would have been beneficial if each method/model in the first part had been applied to a Johannine character in the second.[81] The other volume, edited by *Steven Hunt, Francois Tolmie,* and *Ruben Zimmermann*, is unique in that it provides an exhaustive treatment of

76. Farelly, *Disciples in the Fourth Gospel*, 184–95.
77. Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 42–61.
78. Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 55–61.
79. For my detailed interaction with her work, see Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 106–10.
80. Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization*.
81. I seem to have been the only one who has done so in this volume.

all (seventy) characters in the Johannine narrative (only the characters of God, Jesus, the Spirit, and the narrator are not considered).[82] While this extensive volume will undoubtedly become an important reference work in Johannine character studies, it lacks a uniform method because the contributors were free to choose their own approach.

The most recent work on character analysis in John's Gospel is an essay by Ruben Zimmermann.[83] Contrary to my uniform approach, Ruben Zimmermann proposes different methods to explore the multiple dimensions of the minor characters. However, I maintain that a uniform approach is better for two reasons. First, it can cope with all major and minor characters without necessarily leading to uniform results. Second, it can facilitate the comparison of characters within a narrative and even across narratives—something a multifarious or open-ended approach is unable to achieve.

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

The Gaps

Our examination of recent studies on Johannine character reveals a few gaps. First, these studies lack either breadth (only looking at a few characters or at a certain aspect of character),[84] or depth (providing only a cursory analysis of some characters).[85] This is obviously due to

82. Hunt, Tolmie, and Zimmermann, eds., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*. The literature review of Johannine character studies in that volume (pp. 23–33) only goes up to 2009.
83. Zimmermann, "Figurenanalyse," 20–53.
84. For example, many scholars study only the female characters (Brown, Schneiders, Schüssler Fiorenza, Seim, van Tilborg, Maccini, Fehribach, Kitzberger, J. Kim); Beck focuses on anonymous characters; Conway and Beirne examine gender pairs; others examine only a few characters (Stibbe, Tolmie, Resseguie, Brant, Howard, Gench, Hylen, Farelly, Myers).

the limitations set by each author's project or emphasis. As a result, certain characters such as John (the Baptist), the world, Nathanael, the crowd, the Twelve, and Joseph of Arimathea have not received much attention in Johannine scholarship. There are two notable exceptions—the work of Culpepper in 1983 and the collection of essays edited by Hunt, Tolmie, and Zimmermann in 2013. However, even Culpepper's comprehensive and significant work has scope for improvement. He provides a theoretical basis for his examination of the Johannine characters (although a rudimentary one), deals with all the relevant Johannine characters (except the world), and provides an extensive taxonomy of faith-responses (but does not classify the characters themselves).[86] While the volume edited by Hunt, Tolmie, and Zimmermann lacks neither breadth nor depth—it deals with no fewer than seventy Johannine characters in about seven hundred pages—the resulting character studies vary greatly because each of the forty-four contributors could choose their own approach. This book, then, will use a *uniform* approach and deal *extensively* with *all* the relevant Johannine characters *and* their belief-responses to Jesus.

The second observation is that there is no comprehensive theory of character in the Gospel of John. Many scholars do not discuss any theory of character (for example, Krafft, Collins, Davies, Maccini, Fehribach, Edwards, Beirne, Howard, Gench), while others provide some theoretical considerations (Culpepper, Stibbe, Beck, Resseguie, Koester, Brant, Hylen), but this is far from a coherent, comprehensive theory of character. Only Tolmie, Conway, Skinner, and Myers undergird their character studies with a strong theoretical discussion. Even though the latest work on Johannine characterization pays considerably more attention to the theory for studying character,

85. For example, the studies of Collins, Koester, Edwards, and Howard.
86. A few others also propose a spectrum or typology of faith-responses, although incomplete and sketchy: R. Brown, *Gospel*, 1:530–31; Barton, *Spirituality of the Gospels*, 128–30; Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 124.

the essays in the volume edited by Skinner simply stress different aspects of character,[87] and the volume edited by Hunt, Tolmie, and Zimmermann has no overarching theoretical framework but advocates an openness with respect to methodology. As a result, *there is still no consensus on how to analyze, classify, and evaluate characters*. Should we draw on ancient methods of characterization (whether Hebrew, Greek, or both), employ modern methods used in fiction, or use both?[88] For character analysis, scholars use a variety of lenses through which to examine the Johannine characters: gender (Conway and many others), anonymity (Beck), social status (Resseguie), ambiguity (Hylen), misunderstanding (Skinner), and ancient topoi (Myers). As for character classification, there is a tendency to oversimplify Johannine characters and categorize them as being flat, minor, or ficelles (Krafft, Collins, Culpepper, Davies, Tolmie, Koester; cf. Myers). Only Tolmie uses a more complex, nonreductionist classification, but, ironically, he reduces the characters to being flat. More recently, scholars have started to recognize that the Johannine characters are more complex (Hylen, Skinner, Farelly, many contributors to the two 2013 volumes on Johannine characters), but there is no uniform approach or agreement on what classification to use. Finally, while most scholars do not evaluate the Johannine characters, other scholars question or object to such evaluation (Conway, Brant, Hylen). Only Culpepper has attempted to do so, but I question his implied ranking of the characters' belief-responses—the evaluation of "adequate" and

87. In fact, my essay in this volume is the only one aiming at articulating a comprehensive approach to the study of character.

88. For example, Culpepper uses the modern character classifications of Forster and Harvey, while accepting that John draws from Greek and Hebrew models of character. Stibbe contends that John uses Hebrew narrative techniques, while Koester and Brant consider Greek tragedy for their understanding of Johannine character. Tolmie and Beck rely mainly on contemporary literary theories; Myers draws solely on ancient Greco-Roman rhetorical practices of characterization; and Conway builds on insights from both contemporary literary theory and Hebrew characterization.

"inadequate" would have sufficed. Most scholars simply provide a string of character descriptions without collating them or classifying the characters and their responses. I contend that all the characters must be classified according to their responses to Jesus because John demands it. He wants us to evaluate the responses in the light of the purpose of his Gospel, mentioned in 20:30–31. It is evident from this extensive discussion that we need a comprehensive *theoretical* framework to study the Johannine characters.

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

Fourth, Conway, in her 2002 article, has pointed out a glaring discrepancy: while many scholars argue that most of John's minor characters personify one single trait or belief-response to Jesus, there is surprisingly little agreement on what each character typifies or represents. She radically challenges the consensus view that "flattens" Johannine characters to particular belief-responses, arguing that the Johannine characters portray varying degrees of ambiguity, causing instability and resulting in responses to Jesus that resist or undermine the Gospel's binary categories of belief and unbelief. Any response to Conway's challenge would necessitate a fresh analysis of Johannine characters. We would have to test whether the minor Johannine

characters are as flat, transparent, and one-dimensional as most scholars would have us believe. If we find that the Johannine characters are more complex and ambiguous, we would need to explain how they operate in John's dualistic world, which seems to offer only the two choices of belief and unbelief.

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

A Theory of Character

Many scholars perceive character in the Hebrew Bible (where characters can develop) to be radically different from that in ancient Greek literature (where characters are supposedly consistent ethical types). Most scholars also sharply distinguish between modern fiction, with its psychological, individualistic approach to character, and ancient characterization, where character lacks personality or individuality. When it comes to John's Gospel, as we observed above, the majority of scholars regard most if not all Johannine characters as "flat" or "types." I question these views and propose a different approach to character in the Gospel of John. What follows is a summary of a comprehensive theory of character in New Testament narrative that I have explained at length elsewhere.[89] I began by examining concepts of character in ancient Hebrew and Greek literature as well as modern narrative, arguing that, although there are differences in characterization, these are differences in emphases

89. Bennema, *Theory of Character*.

rather than kind. It is therefore better to speak of degrees of characterization along a continuum. Both ancient and modern literature can portray flat and round, static and dynamic characters, although in modern narrative character is far more developed and "psychologized."[90]

I then articulated a comprehensive theory of character in New Testament narrative, consisting of three aspects. Applied to John's Gospel, this theory works as follows. First, I study character in text and context, using information in the text and other sources.[91] Since the Gospel of John is a nonfictional narrative whose author is a reliable eyewitness to the events recorded (19:35; 21:24), the Johannine characters have historical referents and must be interpreted within the sociohistorical first-century Jewish context and not just on the basis of the text itself. The historical data available to us from other (literary and nonliterary) sources will often supplement the data that the text provides about a character. In this interpretative process, I use the concept of a "plausible historically informed reader," that is, a modern reader who has an adequate knowledge of the general first-century world and who can give a plausible explanation for the ancient sources she or he presumes. Hence, I suggest that a reader of John's Gospel knows the Old Testament and Mark's Gospel.[92] This does not imply that we can simply read these Johannine characters through a Markan lens; rather, our reading of these Johannine characters is informed by a prior understanding of them from a Markan perspective. We will see that at times John's information concurs with what we know about these characters from the Markan

90. Bennema, *Theory of Character*, chapter 2.
91. Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 62–72.
92. For the case that John knew Mark's Gospel and assumed that his audience was familiar with the Markan narrative, see Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," 147–71; Anderson, *Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, 126–29.

narrative, but at other times, John's information complements or even deviates from that of Mark.

At the same time, in presenting his characters, John may have left out, changed, or added certain details from his sources—as historians and biographers often do. For example, John (the Baptist) appears in this Gospel as an eloquent witness to Jesus while the Synoptics present him as a rough-hewn figure preaching a baptism of repentance. The Beloved Disciple may well have been as perfect as this Gospel portrays him or could have been somewhat "idealized." If the Gospels belong to the genre of the ancient Greco-Roman biography, as many scholars contend today,[93] they need not be viewed as "objective, factual" accounts akin to courtroom transcripts. The Gospels would be expected to represent accurately the *ipsissima vox* rather than the *ipsissima verba Jesu*, and the speech of characters would often be paraphrases rather than the literal words. While the Gospel authors may have exercised this literary freedom, what matters is that the reader need not doubt their credibility; they would not have created fictitious characters.[94] Thus, the historicity of the characters in John's Gospel does not exclude the possibility that John used a legitimate degree of freedom to portray them. Besides, the Gospel authors were theologians (rather than historians in a strict sense of the word). They wrote from a post-Easter perspective and interpreted the pre-Easter events with a specific agenda in mind, that is, they reflected on the Christ event and articulated its significance and implications for the early church. The primary concern of John is to assure his readers that his account of Jesus is a true and reliable testimony (cf. 19:35; 21:24).

93. The compelling case for this has been made by Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 213–32.
94. Cf. Keener, *Gospel*, 12–34; Bauckham, "Historiographical Characteristics," 93–112; Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 384–411; Evans, "Reliability," 97–100; Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 31–33, 94–107; Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 26, 29, 36; Redman, "Eyewitness Testimony," 68.

Second, I analyze and classify the Johannine characters along three continua (complexity, development, inner life), and then plot the resulting character on a continuum of degree of characterization (from agent to type to personality to individuality).[95] Let me briefly explain. I classify the Johannine characters, using the nonreductionist classification of Jewish scholar Yosef Ewen, who advocates three continua or axes upon which a character may be situated:

- *Complexity*: characters range from those who display a single trait to those who display a complex web of traits, with varying degrees of complexity in between.
- *Development*: characters range from those who show no development to those who are fully developed. Development is *not* simply the reader becoming aware of an additional trait of a character later in the narrative or a character's progress in his or her understanding of Jesus. Instead, development is revealed in the character's ability to surprise the reader, when a newly found trait replaces another or does not fit neatly into the existing set of traits, implying that the character has changed.
- *Penetration into the inner life*: characters range from those who are seen only from the outside (their minds remain opaque) to those whose consciousness is presented from within.[96]

I will mark each continuum by *degree*, creating a sliding scale instead of a polar scale.[97] This will help us decide *how* we can position a character on each of Ewen's continua. Thus, instead of having a continuum of complexity with two opposite poles, "simple" and

95. Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 72–90.
96. Ewen's works are only available in Hebrew but his theory is summarized in Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 41–42. For a discussion of whether Ewen's model can be extended with additional continua, see Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 82–85.
97. I am indebted to Mieke Bal for this refinement (*Narratology*, 86–88).

"complex," I will use a continuum that indicates the degree of complexity: "none," "little," "some," and "much." This refinement or precision will facilitate an evaluation of how the various characters compare to each other. We cannot stop here, however, or we will be left with three disconnected continua. I suggest, instead, that we supplement Ewen's model with an *aggregate* continuum that collates the data from the individual continua to indicate or measure the character's total degree of characterization. In other words, after plotting a character along the three continua of complexity, development, and inner life, we must classify or plot the resulting character on *an aggregate continuum of degree of characterization* as (i) an agent, actant, or walk-on; (ii) a type, stock, or flat character; (iii) a character with personality; or (iv) an individual or person. It must be noted that in classifying ancient characters, I use the categories "personality" and "individual/person" not in the modern sense of an autonomous individual but to refer to a "collectivist identity" or "group-oriented personality" where the individual identity is *embedded* in a larger group or community.[98] In the concluding chapter, I will present the results of my character analysis in the following table:

98. Cf. Malina, *New Testament World*,60–67; Neyrey, *Gospel*, 6.

Character	Complexity	Development	Inner Life	Degree of Characterization
Character 1	0	0	>0	agent
Character 2	–	0	0	type
Character 3	–/+	0	–	personality
Character 4	+	+	–	personality
Character 5	++	+	+	toward individual
Character 6	+++	++	+	individual

Key: 0 = none, – = little, = some, = much

I avoid quantifying the terms *little*, *some*, and *much* but position a character on each continuum *in relation to* other characters. While some may question such an "intuitive" approach and prefer more precise definitions or "objective" criteria for what constitutes "little," "some," and "much," I do not think this is achievable or desirable. I place each character on a particular continuum proportionate to the other characters, and therefore the character's positioning is always relative.

Third, besides analyzing and classifying the Johannine characters, we must evaluate them in terms of theirresponses to Jesus and their role in the plot, after which I will seek to determine their significance or representative value for today.[99] I evaluate the characters' responses

to Jesus in keeping with *John's* evaluative point of view, purpose, and dualistic worldview. As the Johannine characters interact with Jesus, John evaluates their responses according to his ideology and point of view and communicates this ideological or evaluative system to the reader with the intention that the reader should embrace it. John's evaluative point of view is informed by the purpose and worldview of his Gospel. John's strategy for achieving the soteriological purpose of writing his Gospel—that his readers may find life in Jesus (20:30-31)—is to put various characters on the stage where they interact with Jesus. John wants his readers to evaluate the characters' responses to Jesus and, in turn, respond to Jesus themselves. John's dualistic worldview allows for only two responses to Jesus—acceptance or rejection—and hence John's evaluative point of view also allows for two options—adequate and inadequate belief-responses. I define an adequate belief-response to Jesus as a sufficiently true understanding of Jesus in terms of his identity, mission, and relationship with his Father, resulting in a commitment to Jesus.[100] I can, however, not quantify such a belief-response; that is, I cannot determine how much authentic understanding is adequate. Instead, I determine whether a character's response is adequate by discerning *John's* evaluation of this response, which is determined by his evaluative point of view. We will see that the characters' responses to Jesus form a broad spectrum, which raises the issue of how they fit in with the dualistic scheme that John has adopted. How will such diverse responses fit into the binary categories of belief and unbelief, adequate and inadequate? I will address this issue in the concluding chapter, where I will also present the array of responses to Jesus (including John's evaluation of each response), the role of the

99. Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 90–106.

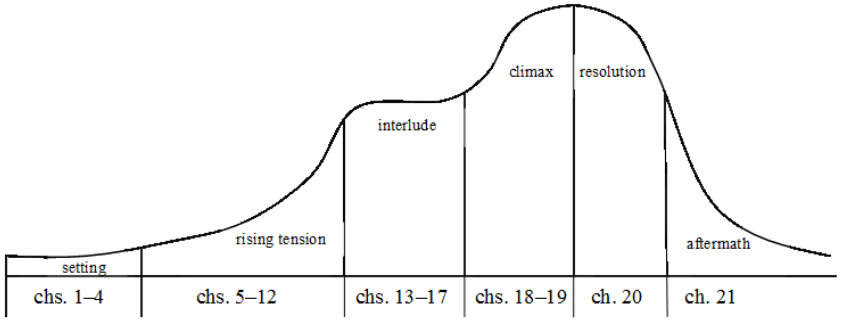
100. Bennema, *Power of Saving Wisdom*, 124–33; Bennema, "Christ," 119–20.

Johannine characters in the plot, and the representative value of the Johannine characters for today.

John's Story of Jesus

Before we examine the Johannine characters, we must look at John's story. Any story consists of events and characters, held together by a plot.[101] If plot is the logical and causal order of events in a narrative, the Johannine plot evolves around Jesus being sent by God into the world to testify to the truth (18:37)—a testimony that addresses the human condition and reveals the Father and Son in terms of their identity, mission, and relationship. People's response to Jesus is crucial because the acceptance of Jesus' testimony or revelation leads to life, whereas rejection leads to death. Jesus' testimony or revelation also causes conflict and eventually leads to his death. On the cross, Jesus lays down his life of his own accord in order to take it up again in the resurrection, after which he commissions his disciples to continue his work in the world.[102] The plot development in John's Gospel is driven by the conflict caused by Jesus' coming and people's responses to him, and can be visualized in the following diagram:[103]

101. Cf. Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 19; Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 3, 6; Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 7.
102. For similar descriptions of the Johannine plot, see Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 79–98; Stibbe, *John's Gospel*, 34, 40–44; Lincoln, *Gospel*, 11–12; Farelly, *Disciples in the Fourth Gospel*, 168–76.
103. I have adapted the diagram in Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 174.



The Gospel's plot is shaped by the author's aim of persuading the reader to believe that Jesus is the Christ and the source of everlasting life or salvation (20:31).[104] Hence, the extent to which the Johannine characters reveal Jesus' identity, mission, and relationship with God, and respond to him is the extent to which they advance the plot.

The Johannine story of Jesus is set within the framework of a cosmic trial or lawsuit, where "the Jews" prosecute Jesus for his divine claims to provide eternal life, to work on God's behalf, and to have a unique relationship with God.[105] John 1:4 puts the story in a nutshell, "in him [Jesus] was (divine) life," and the rest of the Gospel then expands this concept. The purpose of John's story is to persuade the reader to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ and the source of everlasting life or salvation (20:31).[106] Through his story, John wants to elicit and increase faith in the life-giving Jesus among his readers.

John's story world is both dualistic and symbolic. It is dualistic in that the world of the narrative is divided into two realms or spheres—the realm above, or heaven, and the realm below, or the earth. God, Jesus, the Spirit, revelation, life, light, grace, truth,

104. See Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 98.
105. See esp. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial*; Trites, *Concept of Witness*, 78–127; Lincoln, *Truth on Trial*.
106. For a discussion of the textual variant in 20:31 ("so that you may *come or continue* to believe"), see any major commentary.

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

John's story world is also highly symbolic. The life-giving qualities of Jesus and his revelatory teaching are often expressed in symbols such as water (4:10-11; 7:38), bread (6:33, 35, 51), light (1:4-5; 8:12), gate (10:9), and vine (15:1, 5). John also uses other symbols, including flesh (3:6), darkness/night (1:5; 3:2; 8:12; 13:30), and blindness (9:1-41). Symbols, as Stibbe explains, are connecting links between two levels of meaning in a story, between two spheres—the sphere of the symbol itself and the sphere that the symbol represents.[107] The Johannine symbols are vehicles of Jesus' life-giving revelation, but their effectiveness depends on whether people perceive that the symbols are pointers to another reality.[108]

I will now outline the story within which the characters operate. John's story is christocentric (it tells the story of Jesus—the incarnate, divine, preexistent Logos) and soteriological in nature (Jesus has a salvific mission). The primary Johannine theological category is "family." The Johannine story depicts a divine family with God the Father and Jesus the Son as the primary members. The main characteristics that define the family relationship of the Father and Son are life, love, truth/knowledge, and glory/honor. This divine

107. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, 19, 27.
108. Painter, "Johannine Symbols," 33, 38.

family is not exclusive; people can join this family and share in the relationship between the Father and Son. However, people are not naturally part of this family because they do not know God and do not belong to the realm of God; instead they are part of the world below. John paints a bleak picture of the world: it does not have a (saving) knowledge of God (7:28; 8:55; 15:21; 16:3; 17:25) and is enveloped in darkness (1:5; 12:46). His verdict in 3:19 is damning: "the light [Jesus] has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." The world, according to John, is in need of the life-giving knowledge of God (cf. 6:63; 17:3).

Since people do not naturally possess this life-giving knowledge—they neither belong to the realm of God nor can they access this divine realm—the solution must come from the realm above. As John explains in his Prologue (1:1-18), the divine response to the world's crisis was illuminating revelation; the Logos-Light came into the world to dispel its darkness through the revelation of God. The world, however, did not recognize or accept the incarnate Logos, but those who did receive him, that is, believe in him, became part of God's family (1:10-13). Or, as John 3:16-17 states, God loves the world and its people to the extent that he sends his Son into the world to save it. Jesus is portrayed as the revealer of God, the dispenser of life, and the mediator between the divine realm above and the human realm below. Jesus' salvific mission is to reveal the character, identity, and work of the Father and himself, and the nature of their relationship (1:18; 3:11-13, 31-36; 8:19; 14:9-11; 15:15; 17:6-8, 26). This life-giving or saving knowledge of God comes primarily through Jesus' revelatory teaching. The revelation of God and Jesus in terms of their identity, mission, and relationship occurs against the backdrop of the Jewish calendar, where the Jewish feasts are often the setting for Jesus' actions, claims, and dialogues.

Jesus is increasingly opposed by "the Jews," who plot to kill him. They eventually realize their aim by manipulating the Roman Pilate to have Jesus crucified. From another perspective, the cross is where the ultimate revelation of God's love and Jesus' life-giving occurs. The cross thus becomes a symbol of revelation, life, glory, and victory.

People who encounter Jesus must respond by either accepting or rejecting him and his salvific teaching. In order to respond adequately in belief, a person must understand Jesus' teaching. However, John's characters often appear dull, tend to misunderstand Jesus, or find his teaching difficult. In short, people lack understanding and hence the capacity to respond adequately in belief. The Spirit is the cognitive agent who enables people to progress in their understanding of and belief-response to Jesus. Thus enabled, those with an adequate belief-response enter, through a birth of the Spirit, into the divine family, having a saving relationship with the Father and Son (1:12-13; 3:3, 5).

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

behavior in terms of ongoing loyalty expressed in or as discipleship. Saving belief for John is *an initial adequate belief-response enabled by the Spirit and expressed in an allegiance to Jesus that is then sustained in discipleship*.[109]

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

Plan and Approach

John uses characters to achieve the stated purpose of his Gospel—to evoke and strengthen belief in Jesus (20:30–31). Our task, then, is to analyze in depth the various Johannine characters, particularly their responses to Jesus. Our aim, in keeping with that of John, is to challenge the readers to identify with one or more of the characters and to discover where they stand in relation to Jesus. Consequently, in this book I will address the following questions. How does John portray and develop his characters, and how do

109. For a comprehensive treatment of John's understanding of salvation and the role of the Spirit, see Bennema, *Power of Saving Wisdom*, chapters 3–5.

we analyze, classify, and evaluate them? How does each character respond to Jesus? From the spectrum of responses John presents to his audience, which ones are acceptable? If John sometimes presents characters as being unstable, complex, and ambiguous (as Conway suggests), how do they operate in a dualistic world that offers them only the choices of belief and unbelief? How does all this affect us—today?

Regarding the scope of the study, there are two important limitations. First, I will not study every character in the Johannine narrative but only those characters that *interact* with Jesus. In other words, I will examine only the so-called *active* characters—those who encounter Jesus and make a particular belief-response to him, whether verbal or nonverbal. Thus, I will ignore characters such as the master of ceremonies in 2:8-10, the servants of the royal official in 4:51-52, the adulterous woman in 7:53–8:11, and the soldiers in John 18–19 (they do not produce a response); Jesus' biological brothers (the information is minimal—they simply disbelieve Jesus and are "from below" [7:3-7]); Judas not Iscariot (he appears only in 14:22); and Caiaphas (he is subsumed under "the Jews"). While I do examine the character of Jesus, the protagonist in the Johannine narrative, I will not consider God, the Spirit-Paraclete, the devil, or the narrator as characters. Second, this book focuses on the study of character rather than characterization. Characterization has to do with the author's techniques of constructing character in the text, whereas I will seek to reconstruct character from the various indicators in the text.

There are two main sources of information for the analysis and reconstruction of Johannine characters: the character text (what characters say about themselves and others) and the narrator text (John's commentary about the characters). I will examine the following aspects: (i) the character's actions; (ii) the character's speech;

(iii) what other characters say about that character; (iv) the narrator's speech. In analyzing the speech of the character and the narrator, I study both the content and style of that speech since *what* is said is sometimes determined by *how* it is said. It is therefore vital to recognize John's literary techniques such as irony, misunderstanding, metaphor, symbolism, and double entendre in order to get the point he wants to make. Besides, characterization in ancient literature is often indirect, and therefore the reader must reconstruct the character's traits by *inference* or "filling the gaps."[110]

As I outlined earlier, I will analyze and classify the Johannine characters along three dimensions (complexity, development, inner life) and plot the resulting character on a continuum of degree of characterization (from agent to type to personality to individuality). Besides analyzing and classifying the characters themselves, I will also evaluate their responses to Jesus and their role in the Johannine plot. Each chapter will conclude with a more systematic collation of information about the character that is dispersed throughout the exegetical sections of the chapter. For each character, the results of my character reconstruction can be presented in the following table of character descriptors:

110. Cf. Bennema, *Theory of Character*, 56–58 (Thesis 3). Even in modern narrative, a character's traits often have to be inferred from the text's deep structure.

Name of Character	
Narrative Appearances	
Origin	Birth, Gender, Ethnicity, Nation/City
	Family (Ancestors, Relatives)
Upbringing	Nurture, Education
External Goods	Epithets, Reputation
	Age, Marital Status
	Socioeconomic Status, Wealth
	Place of Residence/Operation
	Occupation, Positions Held
	Group Affiliation, Friends
Speech and Actions	In Interaction with the Protagonist
	In Interaction with Other Characters
Death	Manner of Death, Events after Death
Character Analysis	Complexity
	Development
	Inner Life
Character Classification	Degree of Characterization
Character Evaluation	Response to the Protagonist
	Role in the Plot
Character Significance[111]	Representative Value

111. I will address the character's significance or representative value in the concluding chapter, after further discussion on this aspect.

The top half of the table (from "narrative appearances" to "death") contains various character descriptors that correspond to the topoi found in ancient Greco-Roman rhetorical handbooks and *progymnasmata*.[112] This information will be gathered as the first step of studying character in text and context through a close reading or exegesis. The rest of the table contains aggregate information about the characters in terms of their complexity, development, inner life, degree of characterization, evaluation, and significance as I outlined above. This meta-level of characterization is essential for determining how characters relate to each other within a narrative. Though this more analytical data about character are distilled from the ancient text by modern literary methods, the information nevertheless arises from the text. Thus, the two parts of the table show the fusion of the ancient and modern horizons in the reconstruction of character.

After having analyzed all the characters, I will plot them in relation to one another—a comparative analysis (see chapter 26). I will also categorize these characters according to their responses to Jesus, since each character's response is typical, representing the response of a particular group of people—both then and now. Although many Johannine characters themselves cannot be reduced to "types," their belief-responses function as such. These characters must therefore be analyzed individually (they are not mere "types") but also as part of John's larger theological framework in order to develop a taxonomy of responses to Jesus (the character's response to Jesus as typical). Besides, the characters in their entirety (traits, development, and

112. After engaging with Alicia Myers's work (see the literature review), I decided to adapt the table of character descriptors that I used in my 2009 study on Johannine characters in order to achieve a greater degree of correspondence with ancient lists of topoi. Except for the categories "upbringing" and "death," most adaptations to the top half of the table are merely rephrasing and reordering earlier categories. It is beyond the scope of this book to discuss whether we should follow a particular list of topoi in antiquity or combine various lists. For the various ancient lists of rhetorical topoi, see Kennedy, trans., *Progymnasmata*; Neyrey, "Encomium versus Vituperation," 529–52; Martin, "Progymnastic Topic Lists," 18–41; Myers, *Characterizing Jesus*, 43–46.

responses) are "representative figures" in that they have a symbolic value or paradigmatic function beyond the narrative, but not in the reductionist, "typical" sense as most scholars maintain (see further chapter 26 below).

Concerning method, I will be guided primarily by the text of John's Gospel as we have it today and use historical inquiry where necessary. This means that I will use elements of literary-critical and historical-critical approaches. How we approach John's Gospel is linked to the issue of where the meaning of a text is located. Traditionally, scholars approached John's Gospel as a "window" through which the reader could peer into the world behind the text. Such scholars have often used John's Gospel to reconstruct the life setting of the so-called Johannine community, which has led to many speculative theories.[113] According to those who take this approach, the characters in John's Gospel represent certain historical groups of people in John's own time and setting.[114] However, with the increasing use of literary methods to read the Bible, scholars such as Culpepper consider John's Gospel as a "mirror" in which meaning is produced by the reader in the act of reading. This book will neither adopt nor reject these approaches in their entirety. Instead, I suggest another way of looking at John's Gospel.

Although I accept that the text shapes the reader's understanding in the act of reading, a reader cannot create any meaning she likes. In any intelligible verbal or nonverbal communication, the sender communicates a message to the receiver with the assumption that the receiver will understand the intended meaning of the sender. In written communication, the intended meaning of the sender (the

113. For example, Martyn, *History and Theology*; R. Brown, *Community*. For a corrective understanding of the Gospel's audience as a general Christian audience rather than a specific, geographically located community, see Bauckham, ed., *Gospels for All Christians*; Klink, *Sheep of the Fold*.

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

author) is located in the text itself and the recipient (the reader) must extract this authorial intention from the text. However, as modern readers, we are separated from John's original audience by time, language, and culture and do not share the knowledge that John and his first readers had in common—their presupposition pool. Hence, at times we must reconstruct this presupposition pool to understand John's intended meaning. This reconstruction is possible through historical inquiry into the world of first-century Judaism from the sources available to us, which means that, where necessary, I will go *beyond* the narrated world of the text. As I mentioned earlier, I assume that the Johannine reader is at least familiar with the Old Testament and Mark's Gospel. Our task as readers is to approach the intent of the author embedded in the text *and* its sociohistorical context. This method can perhaps be called "historical narrative criticism."[115] Besides, since character is often inferred from the text, exegesis is the primary means for our character reconstruction.[116] Having laid the groundwork, I will now turn to the main task—the study of the Johannine characters.

115. See also M. de Boer, "Narrative Criticism," 35–48; Motyer, "Method," 27–44; Vanhoozer, *Meaning*; Turner, "Historical Criticism," 44–70. Although James Resseguie presents a more "mature" form of narrative criticism, stating that the narrative critic should be familiar with the cultural, linguistic, social, and historical assumptions of the audience envisioned by the implied author, he nevertheless contends that this information must be obtained *from the text itself* rather than from outside the text (*Narrative Criticism*, 32, 39). Tanja Schultheiss challenges my historical-narratological approach and suggests a synchronic approach instead (restricted to the Johannine text) followed by a diachronic approach (analyzing the corresponding Synoptic texts) (*Das Petrusbild im Johannesevangelium*, 40 n. 232, 59 n. 61, 72–79).

116. Exegesis is the process of the interpreter's understanding of the author's intended meaning of the text (see Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation*, 72).