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HOW JOHN WORKS

Storytelling in the Fourth Gospel

Edited by

Douglas Estes and Ruth Sheridan

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INTRODUCTION

Douglas Estes

The Gospel of John is arguably the most read book of the New Testament. So prominent is this gospel that it would be difficult to overstate its impact on world culture. We only need to consider a particular snippet of Jesus's speech in John—what we today refer to as John 3:16—to see how great an impact the *words* of John have had on our world. Yet below these words exists a powerful *story* that has had a similar, incalculable impact. Just saying the phrase “water into wine” draws all hearers within range of Western tradition to reference the story of the miracle at Cana (John 2:1–11). These two examples are simply the tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to John: there is the “Word,” the raising of Lazarus, the call to eat Jesus's flesh and drink his blood, Mary Magdalene wiping Jesus's nard-anointed feet with her hair, the rumor of John living on earth until Jesus's return, the “signs” and “I am” statements, the resurrection, the mystery of the Beloved Disciple, and much, much more that have left indelible marks on our world. John has made these indelible marks because of the power of the story that people have read.

At this point a reader may protest, “But it is not the story of John that has made such impact—it is the events and the testimony and the words of Jesus that make it what it is.” However, the very first words of John, “In the beginning...” stop this protest cold. John could have taken the words and events and testimony and transcribed it into a list of what Jesus did and said. He did not, and he did not for a reason.¹ John created a story that would make powerful connections between the real world and the world of his story. John's story connects each of these words and events and tes-

1. Plus, there is the cryptic explanation by Papias for John's writing, which he describes as a “spiritual gospel” created by John, since the “outward [literally, *bodily*] facts” were already known (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.7).

timonies in such a way as to build meaning through the arc of their story. In contrast, bald statements and colorless lists do not make for much use in the larger world. They are not connective. They also are not natural to people, as human beings are fundamentally storytellers (not transcribers or list makers). Therefore, it is the shaping of the raw materials that John had that makes for the real meaning of his life of Jesus. It is this shaping that is the subject of this book: how John works; how storytelling succeeds in the Fourth Gospel.

NARRATIVE DYNAMICS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Interest in how John tells his story continues to be a fruitful discussion some forty or fifty years after the “narrative turn” in biblical studies.² Without discounting the importance of historical investigation, literary critical approaches to John have established themselves as worthwhile avenues for defining how certain events from history became world-changing stories.³ This transformation of raw material to stories about Jesus is, in itself, its own “narrative turn,” of which literary-critical studies of the gospels have only begun to scratch the surface. Literary critical approaches to John show that there is a “meaning” in the text—in the sense that raw materials have been transfigured into powerful stories that affect readers even today.

This transfiguration (or narrativization) of events and words and testimonies into a communicable story is both a natural outgrowth of being human and an intentional plan to add meaning to these raw materials. When studying the transfiguration of an ancient story, one has to start with the features or aspects of the story that we have at hand. We work back through the narrative process. This is because there is no way to go back to the raw material and work forward.⁴ The result is that we may

2. For a history of this turn, see, e.g., Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel*, SNTSMS 73 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5–13.

3. For a recent evaluation of literary criticism of John, including possible new directions, see Stanley E. Porter, “Study of John’s Gospel: New Directions or the Same Old Paths?” in *Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament: Studies in Tools, Methods, and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 277–306.

4. This is true even if scholars had a sayings source; this source would not be the same thing as all the raw materials that went into the creation of the gospels. For

create an “anatomy” of the story, showing its different parts and how these parts are connected.⁵ Yet this book looks to take this approach a step further by looking a little less at parts (static) and a little more at process and action (dynamic). These processes and actions within narrative—movements that actually *make* narrative—are what we call *narrative dynamics*.

Thus, in one sense narrative dynamics concern “the movement of a narrative from its opening to its end.”⁶ But the various aspects and features of narrative are not easily isolatable in stories; they all work together to create the ups and downs of story. Thrice now I have used the word “powerful” in this introduction. Readers may assume that the “power” I am referring to is John’s frequent challenge(s) to believe in Jesus that create moving religious experiences within readers. Though it is true that this occurs and that John can do this (after all, it is the point of the story, John 20:31), here I am using the word “powerful” for a slightly different reason. I use it to indicate that, when stories are told, there is an activity or action that must animate the telling of the story. Not the reading, necessarily, but in the story itself. As Paul Ricoeur points out, from the beginning of Aristotle’s writing on *Poetics*, an intentional regard for the *power* of story is required for it to complete itself and become a meaningful story. To put it another way, it is not the parts that make a story but how the parts are put together that make a story. Ricoeur goes one step further and explains that Aristotle (and, by extension, the literary tradition from Aristotle to John to us today) is not interested in the *structure* of a story but in the *structuration* of a story.⁷ This gets us to the heart of how a story is told.

example, the writer of John had access to cultural insights—a raw material—that we no longer possess.

5. Intentional allusion to the original work of R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and cf. Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature*, RBS 55 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008).

6. Brian Richardson, “General Introduction,” in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 1.

7. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988), 1:48; and cf. Holly E. Hearon, “The Storytelling World of the First Century and the Gospels,” in *The Bible*

THE THING ABOUT POWERFUL STORIES

There are two things that we can say about powerful stories. First, powerful stories are created from powerful raw materials. Powerful stories are not typically created out of the mundane or the uninspired; they are often about love, or war, or hope, or similar great ideas and great themes. It will be no surprise to anyone that many stories are written about the military habits of Julius Caesar (battles and victories), but few are written about the dietary habits of Julius Caesar (what he had for dinner on a typical kalends). Second, and less often noted, powerful stories tend toward more intense scrutiny and questioning from later readers. For example, the *Iliad* is one of the greatest stories in the Western tradition. Yet readers have studied it and criticized it and picked at it from antiquity to the present day.⁸ In fact, powerful stories with powerful themes *invite* an increase in scrutiny. When readers read a powerful story, they naturally want to know how such a powerful story came about, what it means, and what makes it tick. Therefore, “the earliest writing that we might call ‘literary theory’ comes from trying to figure out how stories work.”⁹ We may call an investigation of the narrative of John’s Gospel “literary critical,” but in the end it is mostly about figuring out how John’s story works.

From this we should not be surprised that readers have put the Gospel of John to the test. As the title *How John Works: Storytelling in the Fourth Gospel* suggests, this book invites readers to do just that through the looking glass of fifteen different narrative features that “powerfully” imbue the story of the Fourth Gospel.¹⁰ With contributions from a group of international scholars who are distinct in social location and reading perspectives but who share a commitment to a scholarly guild, the intent of this volume is not only to show “how John works” but how these different narrative dynamics are related and tied to one another. Like nar-

in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance, ed. Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 34.

8. René Nünlist, “Some Ancient Views on Narrative, Its Structure and Working,” in *Defining Greek Narrative*, ed. Douglas Cairns and Ruth Scodel, ELS 7 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 158.

9. Janine Utell, *Engagements with Narrative*, REL (London: Routledge, 2016), 2.

10. In most cases, previous attempts to point out narrative features of the gospel either focused on one feature (or a few features) or drifted further towards a traditional commentary. While we could fill many books with the narrative dynamics of John, our present situation required a compromise: selecting the top fifteen features.

ratives in general, sometimes there is a great deal of continuity and, in a few places, notes of divergences, but the essays work together to help the reader understand the movement of story in the Gospel of John. This, then, is how John works.

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