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Resseguie, James L.

The Strange Gospel: Narrative Design and Point of View in John

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This study deals with the way in which devices known within narrative criticism can be used to describe the process of intended communication of the message of the author(s) of John to its readers. Resseguie presents a careful, positive approach to the question on the relationship between a document and its reader. The reader “discovers what the author intended to be found in the first place” (25). This means that the reader in fact engages in the act of producing meaning, but in such a way that the activity is steered by what the author intended—in other words, the reader’s production should end with the author’s intention. Resseguie analyses the Gospel according to John within the framework of this view on the relationship between author and reader.

He starts out by discussing “point of view.” Objective and subjective points of view, ideological, spatial, temporal, phraseological, and psychological points of view also receive attention. He concludes this first section, or introduction, by paying attention to the narrator and the reader.

Point of view by rhetoric then receives attention. He focuses on three well-known literary devices in this Gospel, namely, irony, misunderstandings, and double entendres. He emphasizes that the ordinary and the earthly (he describes it in many other terms as well) are contrasted with extra-ordinary and spiritual realities, which leads the reader through

the process of defamiliarization. He regards defamiliarization as typical of all the ways point of view are expressed in this Gospel. In cases of irony, the earthly is ironically replaced with the spiritual, but in cases of ambiguity there is extension of meaning where not only the earthly, but also the spiritual, is intended. This chapter does not really offer new information. As is the case with this book in general, it makes a positive contribution by gathering relevant material related to these aspects and discussing them in a structured and coherent way. The discussion is not too technical and does not fall into the trap of over-laboring aspects. It makes the material in this book suitable for use in the classroom. Anybody who is interested in making his students aware of irony or misunderstanding in the Gospel according to John could prescribe these pages without hesitation.

An interesting chapter on point of view through setting follows. Resseguie concentrates on space: the inside and outside, center and perimeter, near and far. In his discussion on the inside and outside, he treats settings such as the sheepfold, garden, courtyard, or praetorium. He shows how a person's position in narrative space typifies his or her narrative identity. Being inside or outside the sheepfold is crucial. Judas and Peter are standing with the raiding party in the garden, which shows that they are unwilling to listen to the truth. Objects such as the well or the temple are personalized, while the tomb as place of death is depersonalized. This provides the reader with strange new points of view. When Jesus stills the storm or helps the disciples to catch fish, the sea is used to express a certain point of view. The struggle for the survival of the disciples simply amounts to human efforts. However, when Jesus enters the scene, everything changes for the good. This is a well-structured and argued chapter. Most of these ideas may be found scattered across the pages of Johannine research, but again Resseguie brought them together in a very consumable way.

However, to return to the remark at the beginning of this review, how productive could or should readers become before they move from the intention of the author to their own agenda? Resseguie cannot be accused of irresponsible reading—he knows how to read a text within the confines of that particular text. Nevertheless, should one “read” every single remark about space in a document in light of what one believes to be the larger ideology, as if every spatial remark were intended as one of the building bricks of the whole? Obviously, the early structuralists argued for the autonomy of texts and would claim that it was not so important whether the author intended it or not. The text is regarded as autonomous, and therefore these aspects get new meaning within the confines of that particular text. But as I understand Resseguie, he is in favor neither of such an autonomous view nor of the view that the text has no confines and is like clay in the hands of the reader. He, therefore, opts for the often grey area where he can claim that his view is indeed what the author intended. The way in which this claim is usually substantiated is by referring to signals in the text itself that support such a reading. With most of what he says I feel comfortable, but there are cases where I wonder whether this could really be safely described as the author's intention. How can one write any

narrative without referring to space simply for “getting a place where things happen”? We are bound to space. Should one constantly try to interpret these spatial references symbolically or as having some special surprising meaning within narratives? If we claim to try and detect the intention of the author (forgetting for a moment about the problem of intentional fallacy), it should be apparent that the author intended it in that way. A proof of the pudding would be whether the earlier commentators read the references, say the references to the garden or the sea in John 21, in this way. In many cases it is the case, which supports Resseguie’s argument, but not in all the cases. This question is relevant to Resseguie’s approach, since he implies that he goes back to an author’s intention as something imbedded in the text. Nevertheless, I repeat, Resseguie reads the text responsibly, and the above remark only applies to some marginal cases.

Resseguie’s discussion on point of view of character is again well written, condensing information effectively. His discussion of Nicodemus (120–27) deserves mention. I can recommend any teacher to prescribe this chapter to his or her students if they are interested in characterization in this Gospel. Resseguie differentiates between the characters, shows development in the characters, illustrates how they function within the plot, demonstrates how roles are switched between seemingly important people and the marginalized, and so on. It is worth reading.

The last chapter, before the conclusion, focuses on point of view and plot. To my mind this is the least convincing chapter in the book. Resseguie uses a U-shaped structure “commonly known as the shape of a comedy” (171) to describe the plot. The prologue and early chapters (John 1–4) represent the top of the first leg of the U. The rest of the chapters up to John 19 represent the bottom of the U. With the resurrection and recognition scenes the top of the second leg of the U is reached. Without going into detail, this plot description is too broad to be of much help and does not account for all the detail.

Resseguie’s conclusion is in line with the style of the rest of the book: well formulated, to the point, and a good summary of what was done on the previous pages of the book.

I enjoyed reading this book for several reasons. However, after completing it I asked myself why I enjoyed reading it. Most of the information in this book can be found elsewhere in the Johannine research (which is certainly true of most of the books published on John nowadays, simply because of the huge amount of energy that is spent on Johannine research and that finds its way into printing houses). The reason for my enjoyment is most probably the creative way in which Resseguie gathers, systematizes, and presents the material. He writes with authority without relying on technical jargon or difficult methodological paces. I appreciated this and will most certainly use his material in my classes. One last remark: like all of Brill’s books, the physical book itself (both inside and outside) is of very high quality.