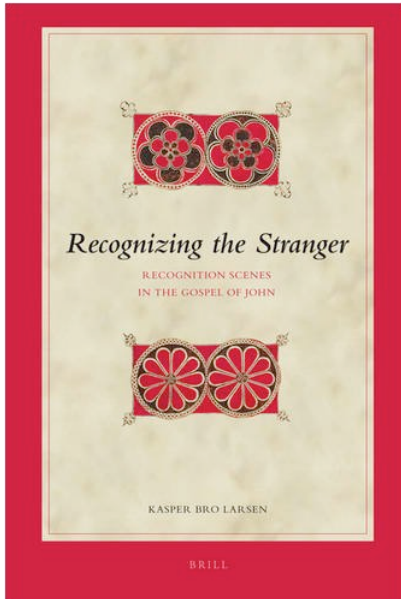


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Larsen, Kasper Bro

Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John

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Dorothy Lee
Trinity College
Parkville, Australia

This monograph is a study of recognition scenes in the narrative and theology of the Fourth Gospel and their contribution to understanding the Gospel as a whole. The book begins with the famous scene between Odysseus and Eurycleia in the *Odyssey* (19.317–507) where the disguised hero is recognized, not by his wife, but by his old nurse on the basis of the scar on his leg. Using Aristotle’s understanding of anagnorisis (recognition scenes), Larsen identifies a similar phenomenon, not only in individual scenes in the Fourth Gospel, but in its overall literary construct. While the presence of anagnorisis is not newly perceived by Larsen’s study, it is given wider significance, more detailed treatment, and more thorough investigation in the light of ancient literary standards. Larsen sets this narrative phenomenon within the overall journey motif of the Gospel where “the point of departure and returns is in the Father’s heavenly realm” (191).

The first chapter gives a literary and historical basis for understanding anagnorisis in ancient literature. Beginning with Aristotle’s *Poetics* for definition, Larsen then turns to modern semiotic theory, particularly that of A. J. Greimas, using aspects of his theory of narrative to help illuminate the Fourth Gospel. Greimas’s distinction between the pragmatic and the cognitive within the structures of communication—with its movement between truth, delusion, secrecy, and falsehood—proves, for Larsen, a helpful model for

comprehending the form of anagnorisis in ancient literature and the Johannine text. This model has to do with the presentation of identity and thus the question of how and why recognition cognitively occurs.

The ensuing three chapters, comprising the main body of the book, explores the Johannine narrative in three consecutive sections, focusing on anagnorisis in relation to (1) arrival (John 1–4, ch. 2), (2) conflict (John 5–19, ch. 3), and (3) departure (John 20–21, ch. 4). In each case, the recognition scenes are examined in relation to the wider plot in which they are embedded. Larsen, in accord with Johannine scholarship in general, locates the dynamics of his theory with the Prologue of the Gospel. There the Evangelist, in giving a christological preview of his main character, sets up the metamorphosis involved in the Logos becoming flesh, which Larsen interprets, not as an ontological change in identity, but rather a change in appearance. Thus the Logos enters the stage of human history, as does Odysseus on his return to his native isle, in the disguise of flesh—with this difference, that “whereas the former is a trickster, the latter is a revealer” (80). Nonrecognition being a significant theme of the Prologue (John 1:10–11), the scene is set for the anagnorisis that appears in individual episodes of the Gospel but that, more importantly, sets out its epistemological underpinnings.

Two scenes stand out in this chapter. First, the gathering of the disciples at 1:35–51 epitomizes Johannine anagnorisis, consisting of a chain of four recognition scenes that work in parallel: the episode with John the Baptist’s two disciples paralleling that with Philip (1:36b–40, 43b–44); and the episode with Simon Peter paralleling that with Nathanael (1:42, 47–51). The *whispering* leading to recognition that, according to Larsen, characterizes the Prologue is transferred here to the story level. The same occurs in the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman toward end of this section of the Gospel (4:1–42). Here Larsen takes issue with the popular view that the original form of this narrative is that of biblical betrothal; while some elements of the latter are present, he argues, the dominant form is that of anagnorisis.

The following chapter covers the main bulk of the Johannine text in terms of content and examines anagnorisis in a number of the narrative scenes in John 5–19—although for obvious reasons (the paucity of narrative as against discourse) the Farewell Discourse is excluded. Instead, Larsen focuses on recognition scenes in John 9 (blindness and insight), the arrival of the hour (13:12–19), the exposure of Judas Iscariot (13:18–30), and events more nearly connected to the passion: Jesus’ arrest (18:1–12); Peter’s denial (18:15–16, 25–27); and the trial before Pilate (18:28–19:16a). As a paradoxical act of glory and honor, the crucifixion is not *recognized* as such by the disciples until the resurrection narratives, but here the recognition is divine: it represents the Father’s recognition of the Son (glorification) and their final reunion in and through the cross.

The last exegetical chapter deals with the resurrection as a catena of recognition scenes between the risen Jesus and the (initially unbelieving) disciples. These are not initial encounters but rather unions after separation and thus are more conventional in character. In John 20, Larsen argues, there are four sequences (in line with R. E. Brown's structure) with a pattern of seeing-telling-hearing-seeing that parallels the opening narrative sequence of the Gospel (1:35–51). In the anagnorisis of Thomas, the Gospel itself and its recognition motif throughout the Johannine narrative reaches its climax. While seeing John 21 as a secondary addition to the Fourth Gospel, Larsen nonetheless sees the meeting with the risen Lord in Galilee as partaking of the same recognition function in relation to resurrection, glorification, and reunion.

The last chapter concludes with a succinct résumé of the thesis proposed in the book, with suggestions for further enquiry along similar lines (219–23). The conclusion is followed by an extensive bibliography and indices of ancient texts and modern authors.

Larsen's study is thorough and comprehensive, and it deserves to be taken seriously. It produces insights into the Johannine texts and new ways of reading that are sensitive to the literary character of ancient texts. The form characterized as anagnorisis is carefully defined and well established within the Johannine narrative. However, whether this motif comprises one dimension of the text or whether it comprehends the text in its entire literary form and theological meaning is another question. One of the features of Johannine narrative is that it seems to lend itself to very different readings, different ways of gathering and organizing its symbolism and literary motifs, so that it becomes difficult to argue for one to the exclusion of other readings. This characteristic itself attests to the deceptive simplicity of the Johannine narrative and its symbolism and its implicit multivalence. There is, after all, more than one angle from which to view the mountain.

Of more concern is some of the language Larsen uses to describe the incarnation. Describing the flesh in this Gospel as "camouflage," in terms of secrecy, and denying any ontological change in the nature of the Logos seems to open the door, once again, to the "naïve docetism" of which Käsemann famously accused the Fourth Evangelist some decades ago. In the light of studies by Udo Schnelle and others, the metamorphosis of this Gospel carries arguably more weight within the framework of the Fourth Gospel—including to the possibility of an antidocetic bent. Granted that a major theme in John's Gospel is that of revelation, does that imply a deliberate secrecy, an appearance that contradicts the inner reality—as Odysseus's rags contradict his kingly identity? Has the Father shrouded the Son in mist for his journey, as the goddess Athene does for Odysseus in his? Or is it that human insight fails to perceive the intangible to be securely and paradoxically located in the tangible and nowhere else?

Whatever questions one may have along these or other lines, this remains a well-crafted and well-written study that is more than worth the reading: in its insight into Johannine narrative, especially in its ancient literary context, and in its challenge to other readings of this text and their neglect of the motif of anagnorisis.