



Bennema, Cornelis

Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John

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Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B.
Australian Catholic University
Victoria, Australia

Responding to a number of studies that have appeared over recent decades, since the birth of interest in the narrative design of the Gospel of John, Cornelis Bennema has produced a volume that attempts to develop an alternative theory to analyze the character in the Fourth Gospel and to apply it to all possible figures from the story who can be regarded as “characters.” A number of significant studies have appeared since the advent of more narrative readings of the text (e.g., Raymond F. Collins, R. Alan Culpepper, Margaret Davies, D. Francois Tolmie, Colleen M. Conway, Mark W. G. Stibbe, Margaret Beirne). Bennema regards these studies as selective in their choice of “characters.” Most conclude, without necessarily using the literary category (although most do), that Johannine characters are “flat” (E. M. Forster). This means that there is little character development, as the storyteller’s narrative ideology is so powerful that they are all used to serve it. They are not ends in themselves. Bennema denies this: “Since the Gospel of John is a non-fictional narrative whose author is a reliable witness to the events recorded (19:35; 21:24), the Johannine characters have historical referents and must be interpreted within the socio-historical first-century Jewish context and not just on the basis of the text itself” (13).

He rejects J. Louis Martyn’s proposal that the Gospel be read as a two-level drama, as the Gospel is a historically reliable story from the past. For example: “We contend that John’s

Gospel is primarily the story of Jesus, and that the encounter in John 9 is authentic and historically reliable” (136 n. 1). He claims that the Gospel was written to bring non-believers to faith and that 20:31 is proof of that agenda. The characters are to be classified according to their responses to 20:30–31. Some may be simply “types,” others are assessed as “personalities,” others “towards individual,” and some “individual.” This assessment depends upon the level of the complexity, development and inner life of each character represented in the story (see 12–15). The bulk of the work is an analysis of these elements in the roles of the following characters: John the Baptist, the world, “the Jews,” Andrew and Philip, Simon Peter, Nathanael, the mother of Jesus, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the royal official, the invalid at the pool, the crowd, the Twelve, Judas Iscariot, the man born blind, Martha, Mary of Bethany, Lazarus, Thomas, the Beloved Disciple, Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea, and Mary Magdalene. Each character is assessed as a “type,” “personality,” “towards individual,” and “individual.” The book closes with a useful classification of all the Johannine characters, according to Bennema’s criteria, the representative value of the characters within John’s dualistic worldview, and a brief remark on the interface between the modern reader and Johannine characters.

The comprehensive nature of the study is valuable. All major players, some of which are often not considered in studies of characters in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. the world), are treated in a way that attempts to assess their role in the narrative such and how they would appear as characters who fit into the socio-political-religious world of first-century Judaism. Bennema is interested in the number of times each character appears, indicators of their identity (name, gender, age, marital status, occupation, socioeconomic status, place of residence, place of activity, relatives, group association), their speech and actions, their character classification (complexity, development, inner life), the degree of characterization (type, personality, towards individual, individual), and their response to Jesus. Obviously, in some characters there is little or nothing about many of the elements in this character “grid,” and in others a great deal can be traced. In the end, the major element in the assessment of each character is their response to Jesus, judged in the light of the evangelistic purpose of the Gospel indicated in 20:30–31.

The author takes a great deal for granted. He refers regularly to his own writings and thus, for example, pursues no detailed argument for the interpretation of 20:30–31 as a passage indicating the evangelical/missionary nature of the Fourth Gospel. As this is nowadays a minority position, it calls for a more detailed treatment (at least discussing the recent fine essay by Gordon D. Fee, “On the Text and Meaning of John 20:30–31,” in *To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical and Theological* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 29–42). He refers the reader to his work elsewhere, but it is crucial to his understanding of characters and should be argued within the covers of this book, as the adequacy of each

“response to Jesus” is determined by how they measure up to the confession of faith articulated in 20:31.

I am puzzled by his rejection of the possibility of a “two-level” reading. Whatever one makes of the original thesis of J. Louis Martyn, its widespread initial acceptance, and the more careful use that is made of it in contemporary Johannine studies, how else is a story told if not at “two levels”? Bennema has read widely in English (only one non-English work is referred to in the whole book [Hans-Joseph Klauck, *Judas—Ein Jünger des Herrn*]) and applies a number of narratological techniques in his analysis of each single character. He also insists that the Fourth Gospel is realistic history. It is hard to link these two approaches. Is the story, as it is told in the Fourth Gospel, a telling of an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus and the man born blind, Jesus and Martha and Mary, Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and so on “realistic history”? Or is it an attempt to tell that story in a way that uses the characters to bring readers to commit themselves to Jesus as required by 20:30–31? If it is the latter, and that is Bennema’s argument, then it is a story told at “two levels”: the level of *wie es eigentlich gewesen war* and what the storyteller does to persuade a later reader into belief in Jesus. The very fact that Bennema has recourse to the Johannine use of narratological techniques in his reading of the “story” of each character indicates some form of “second level.”

There is no discussion of the place of John 21 within the whole narrative, despite the importance of 20:30–31 for his thesis. It is taken for granted that character development can be followed from 1:19 to 21:25 (see, e.g., the study of the Beloved Disciple [171–82, esp. 174]). It is increasingly claimed, especially by narrative critics, that John 21 is “part of the story.” But this case must be argued, not simply taken for granted (see Francis J. Moloney, “John 21 and the Johannine Story,” in *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature* [ed. Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore; SBLRBS 55; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008], 237–51).

There are literary and exegetical decisions on almost every page that I would question. I offer an example of each. Is there any literary relationship between the Cana story in 2:1–11 and the further Cana story in 4:46–54? In a brief chapter that tells us of the royal official’s identity, appearance, character classification, degree of characterization (towards personality), and response to Jesus (adequate), the possible literary function of two Cana miracles, and their relationship to one another, is never mentioned. Yet Bennema informs his readers that after the miracle he would have met his servants “halfway between Capernaum and Cana” (96 n. 12). Bennema misses the wood for the trees.

In the light of 11:40, where Jesus severely challenges the faith reflected by Martha’s concern over the opening of the tomb after four days, I cannot accept an exegetical

interpretation of 11:27 as an “ideal” expression of Johannine faith, entirely consonant with 20:31 (146–47; see my *The Gospel of John* [SP4; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998], 327–32). Bennema sees the difficulty of 11:40 but explains it away: “her faith may have cringed in the face of reality” (147 n. 13). Does “ideal” Johannine faith “cringe in the face of reality”? Bennema is caught in his dilemma of what the storyteller is communicating to a reader through a portrayal of “ideal faith” (the Johannine message) and what actually happened to Martha (“realistic history”). John 11:27 and 40, where Martha is the protagonist, must be read *together* as part of the Johannine narrative portrayal of the character of Martha. To introduce a “cringe” is unacceptable.

Readers of this study of Johannine characters (not Johannine characterization) will need to come to their own decision about its value. Bennema is a graduate of the London School of Theology and Allahabad Bible Seminary and currently teaches in Bangalore, India. He consistently makes strongly evangelical decisions about many problematic questions associated with study of the Fourth Gospel that, in this reviewer’s opinion, need to be argued rather than affirmed.

The cover of the book is highlighted by an endorsement from R. Alan Culpepper: “This is the book I have been waiting for.” I have to admit I am still waiting.