

REVIEW

CHARACTERS IN JOHN

Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmerman, edd., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*. WUNT, 314. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013. Pp. xvii + 724. Hardback, €194.00. ISBN 978-3-16-152784-5.

The most appropriate descriptor of this volume is the word ‘comprehensive’. The editors have undertaken the enormous task of piecing together a book that treats ‘nearly every’ character appearing in John’s Gospel. As library shelves have expanded to accommodate new books on character studies in the Bible in general and in John in particular, this work stands out among them by its sheer scope. Since seventy characters or character groups are treated in this work, I will not supply an overview of each chapter in this review, opting instead to provide general comments on the book’s overall contribution.

The introductory essay is true to form by offering a comprehensive overview of character studies in contemporary scholarship (while giving Aristotle his appropriate pre-modern-era dues). The editors’ account of major works casts a wide net, then narrows in focus, beginning with theoretical approaches in literary criticism to characterisation in biblical studies to characterisation in the Synoptics and Acts, and then eventually to the same type of studies in John. Focus sharpens even further in the literature review on character studies in the Fourth Gospel by the division of subheadings into ‘Early and General Studies’, ‘Gender Studies’, and ‘Special Focus Studies’. This summary helpfully directs readers into the dense topography of literary theory and is followed by a detailed ‘Table on the Characters in the Fourth Gospel’.

Though the book is organised into chapters, each essay can be read on its own, independent of the others. Since the fourth evangelist grants more narrative space to certain characters than others, the ‘chapters’ naturally differ from other multi-volume studies in the variety of their length. The longest chapter is devoted to ‘the Jews’, a collective unit whom Ruben Zimmerman deems ‘the most complex character in the entire Gospel’ (107). Other chapters may consist of only a handful of pages, indicative of the prominence (or lack thereof) of each character or group in the Gospel.

The noting of this brevity is not meant to imply that insights are minimal in these shorter chapters. By way of example, Gary T. Manning’s contribution

on the disciples of John the Baptist offers substantial interpretative fruits. He highlights a contrast underway between the two followers of the Baptist in John 1 with those in John 3. The former are ideal disciples because they obey their own Rabbi, John, to follow the better Rabbi, Jesus. The activities associated with their depiction are actions celebrated as authentic discipleship: they hear John, follow Jesus, seek Jesus, come and see, remain with Jesus, and one (Andrew) finds his brother and introduces him to Jesus (128). The Baptist-followers in John 3, however, are distracted by issues of purity that Jesus will render insignificant. They neither follow Jesus nor mention his name (129). Manning's insightful treatment of these obscure figures in the Fourth Gospel is indicative of the discerning exegesis found throughout the volume.

In tasking contributors to provide literary-critical studies of both major and minor narrative figures, the editors have produced a resource as long as many standard major commentaries on John with as many insights, yet from less familiar approaches to the biblical text. Since characters are featured in their order of appearance in the Gospel, the book can actually be read from cover to cover. With so many commentaries on hand for studying John, this book becomes a helpful new resource that can be used as a fresh alternative for intermediate and seasoned readers alike.

There is no prescribed narratological methodology universally used by each author. When the book is read as a whole, it has the effect of granting readers a broad exposure to the range of available methodological approaches on character study (e.g., discourse analysis, or Greimas' actantial model, or Benema's theory of characterisation). If the book is used more as a reference work for research on a specific figure, there is the possible disadvantage that the character under review may only be studied from a more limited set of literary angles.

A curious feature of a book studying every character in an ancient text is that characters so minor that they are barely noticed in the act of reading receive serious attention. Though I expressed above my appreciation of this approach and acknowledged the potential insights, the hermeneutical risk is that characters who are truly minor are made less so if contributors overstretch conclusions in their respective chapters. As long as the exegesis is responsible and suitably cautious, this risk is worth taking, since it encourages readers of John to explore more deeply the narrative texture by considering figures who may be customarily passed over or unconsciously dismissed.

It seems a bit odd that evil supernatural characters are allowed space in this volume *but not* Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit-Paraclete (though, admittedly, they appear in discussions all throughout the span of chapters). In the opening line of his treatment on 'The Devil' in John's Gospel, Dave Mathewson writes, '[a]lthough we usually associate characters in a story with human characters, it is important to observe that supernatural characters should also be included' (421). Even so, the primary divine figures do not have

dedicated chapters within the volume. This editorial move is openly admitted in the Foreword, but not justified beyond reporting that ‘authors of other recent publications on characters in John’ would understand. The decision may well be justifiable, but this reviewer would have appreciated a more robust explanation. Chapters on Jesus, God, and the Spirit written with the thoroughness and creativity that marks the entirety of the volume would have been welcome.

This observation notwithstanding, *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel* is so comprehensive in scope and impressive in exegetical insights that it deserves a place on the shelves amidst the great commentaries on John for which it serves as a refreshing supplement. The editors and contributors have provided a rich gift for both elephants and toddlers who venture into the stirring Johannine waters.

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