

THE CHARACTERS IN JOHN 20:1–31

The use of time should be taken into account in an assessment of the rhetorical use of the characters in 20:1–31.¹⁶

(1) The report of the experience of Peter and the Disciple whom Jesus loved (20:3–10) is recorded as something that happened in the past. They are dismissed from the story-world in verse 10. However, immediately prior to that dismissal, the use of the pluperfect tense (*ēideisan*) points to a past time, after which much has happened. The narrator reports that at that time “they did not yet know the Scripture.” The expression contains the hint of a promise that one day they will come to that knowledge.¹⁷ That experience is not recorded *within* 20:1–31.

(2) Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and Thomas experience a journey from lack of faith to a confession of Jesus recorded *within the time frame of the narrative*:

(2a) Mary Magdalene moves from a conviction that the body has been stolen (vv. 1–2, 11–16), to “her” being recognized by Jesus who prevents her from *clinging* to him (vv. 16–17), to her acceptance of a mission from the Risen Jesus (verse 18).

(2b) Although not as intense as the requests of Mary Magdalene and Thomas, the disciples experience the *physical* presence of Jesus: “He showed them his hands and his side” (v. 20).

(2c) Thomas is initially absent when the risen Jesus appears (v. 24), and he will not accept that Jesus has risen “unless” certain *physical* conditions are fulfilled (v. 25). Challenged by the appearance of Jesus (vv. 26–27), he confesses that Jesus is his Lord and God (v. 28).

With the exception of Peter and the Beloved Disciple, the experiences of faith in the risen Jesus resolved *within the narrative itself* are the result of *seeing* Jesus, and they are shot through with the physical. As the narrative closes, Jesus contrasts Thomas’s arrival at faith on the basis of “sight” with those “who have not seen and yet believe” (vv. 24–29).¹⁸ The aorist parti-

16. See especially Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane A. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 86–160.

17. This is conveyed by the English translation “yet,” rendering the temporal aspect of the Greek *oudepō*. See BDAG, s.v. *oudepō*.

18. For a very different reading of 20:24–29, see Popp, “Thomas,” 513–23. Popp presents Thomas in an entirely positive light, suggesting that all he asks in his request to touch Jesus is the Easter experience had by Mary Magdalene and the other dis-

ciples describing “those who have not seen [*hoi mē idontes*] and yet believe [*kai pisteusantes*]” and the general context of these culminating words of Jesus indicate that they are directed to believers who live in the time after the return of Jesus to his Father (see 17:5; 20:17).¹⁹ Those who are blessed belong to a later generation living in the period of the absence of Jesus. In other words, Jesus’s blessing within the narrative is directed *forward* into a time and a situation that *lies beyond the limitations of the narrative*, to a time when the sight of Jesus, and the possibility of physical proximity, are no longer available.

Peter, the Disciple whom Jesus loved, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and the rest of the disciples are characters *in the story*. As such, Peter and the Disciple whom Jesus loved cannot yet know the Scripture (*tēn graphēn*), as they are part of it. Within John 20, only the Disciple whom Jesus loved comes to faith without seeing Jesus (vv. 11–18). But this story was written (*gegraptai*, v. 31) for the readers and hearers of *this gospel* who believe without seeing.²⁰ Located in a *time outside the narrative*, they have it in hand; they are hearing it recited or watching its performance.²¹ Only they are blessed (*makarioi*, v. 29). Peter and the Disciple whom Jesus loved disappear from the narrative as they return to their respective homes (v. 10), never to be heard of again within John 20.²² Is it possible that John is giving a unique status to his “writing” that the *characters in the story* cannot yet know (v. 9), while the *recipients of the story* are instructed that

ciples. The beatitude of v. 29 includes Thomas, and thus the episode “presents the final amplification of touching the Risen One in John 20” (521). He adds that, “Thomas is on the highest peak of the Christological mountain of the Fourth Gospel” (527). This downplays the absence in v. 24, the conditionals in v. 25, closing with “I will not believe,” and the author’s pointing elsewhere (to those who cannot “touch” Jesus) with the beatitude of v. 29.

19. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of biblical texts are my own.

20. The temporal aspect of the perfect tense of the verb “has been written” also plays into the author’s use of time. This book has been written in the past, but the perfect tense of the verb *gegraptai* indicates that it is still available, providing access to faith in Jesus and the life that comes from faith in his name.

21. See Francis J. Moloney, “‘For as Yet They Did Not Know the Scripture’ (John 20:9): A Study in Narrative Time,” *ITQ* 79 (2014): 97–111.

22. Labahn, “Simon Peter,” 162–63, rightly points to Peter’s need for an encounter with the risen Lord. But he claims that it “is provided in a subsequent scene: 20:19–29, which leads him to post-Easter understanding.” But Peter and the Beloved Disciple are decisively dismissed in v. 10. There is no indication in the narrative that Peter is present for vv. 19–29, whatever one makes of John 21.

they are hearing the Scripture (*tēn graphēn*), written (*gegraptai*) that they may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing have life in his name (vv. 30–31)?²³ Which “Scripture” is referred to in verse 9?²⁴

Perhaps the readers of the Gospel of John accept that “the word” they hold in their hands is “the Scripture.” This is something that the Disciple whom Jesus loved and Peter, key players in the drama of the narrative, “as yet” were not able to understand (20:9).²⁵ Such understanding will be provided for the readers of the story “later” (v. 29).²⁶ That will be made clear in verses 29–31. A candidate for the “Scripture” that Peter and the Disciple whom Jesus loved did *not yet* know (v. 9) is the Johannine story. It was

23. Other recent scholars, on somewhat different grounds, have suggested this possibility. See Andreas Obermann, *Die christologische Erfüllung der Schrift im Johannesevangelium: Eine Untersuchung zur johanneischen Hermeneutik anhand der Schriftzitate*, WUNT 2/83 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 409–22, esp. 418–22; Klaus Scholtissek, “‘Geschrieben in diesem Buch’ (Joh 20,30): Beobachtungen zum kanonischen Anspruch des Johannesevangeliums,” in *Israel und seine Heilstradition im Johannesevangelium: Festgabe für Johannes Beutler SJ zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Michael Labahn, Klaus Scholtissek, and Angelika Strotzman (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004), 207–26, esp. 219–24; Michael Labahn, “Jesus und die Autorität der Schrift im Johannesevangelium: Überlegungen zu einem spannungsreichen Verhältnis,” in Labahn, Scholtissek, and Strotzman, *Israel und seine Heilstradition*, 185–206. See the excellent summary of Obermann’s work in Ruth Sheridan, *Retelling Scripture: “The Jews” and the Scriptural Citations in John 1:19–12:15*, *BibInt* 110 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 27–32.

24. For a result of a survey of scholarly opinion see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:1184: “The Scripture to which John refers is unclear here.”

25. For more detail, see Moloney, “A Study in Narrative Time,” 104–7. For a response to this essay, see Brendan Byrne, “A Step Too Far: A Critique of Francis Moloney’s Understanding of ‘the Scripture’ in John 20:9,” *ITQ* 80 (2015): 149–56. Byrne’s response reflects a lack of care over the shift of focus in the use of “had been written” in 1:19–12:16, in support of christological claims, and the “fulfilment” of Scripture from 12:38–19:37 (reaching its high point in 19:30), a tendency to read John as if he was Paul, and a lack of appreciation of the uniqueness of the Fourth Gospel’s claim to be the word about “the Word.” Byrne’s work on John is always informative (see, for example, his *Life Abounding: A Reading of John’s Gospel* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015]), but often lacks a depth of appreciation of Johannine nuance and uniqueness.

26. On the “narrative tension,” pointing the reader/listener to the *dénouement* of the Johannine version of Jesus’s death and resurrection, see Francis J. Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical, Theological, and Literary Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 71–98.

impossible for them to know this Scripture because they are characters *in the story* and thus *not yet* (*oudepō*) readers or hearers *of the story*. As such, the “Scripture” of the Gospel of John is not available to the Disciple whom Jesus loved. But he has been presented as the first disciple to come to belief in the risen Jesus, *even though he does not see Jesus*.

The response of the other individual foundational disciples—one a woman (20:1–2, 10–18) and the other a man (20:24–29)—is strikingly different from that of the Disciple whom Jesus loved. They seek to establish a “fleshly” contact with the Jesus they can see and touch (see especially 20:16–17, 25, 27). The same must be said for the disciples. Informed that Jesus is now the risen Lord (v. 18), they also “see” Jesus and are shown the physical evidence of his hands and his side (vv. 19–20). They are to be his sent ones, the bearers of his word (see 18:21), and whoever receives them will receive Jesus and the one who sent him (13:20). It is to that “later” world, however, touched by the witness and the critical presence of the disciples (vv. 19–23), that Jesus directs his final blessing (v. 29).²⁷

THE VOICE OF THE NARRATOR IN JOHN 20:30–31

Turning away from Thomas, Jesus’s final words in John 20 are directed to later generations of readers and hearers, those who have not seen Jesus but still believe (v. 29). The narrator then tells them why he wrote this book (vv. 30–31). Looking back across the faith journeys recorded in the episodes of the Disciple whom Jesus loved, Mary Magdalene, the disciples gathered behind closed doors, and Thomas, there is an important link between Jesus’s final blessing of those who do not see and yet believe (v. 29) and the experience of the Disciple whom Jesus loved: he also did not see, yet he believed (v. 8). This is what it means to be a disciple whom Jesus loves.²⁸ The author, in fact, suggests that later generations, those who do

27. Against Popp, “Thomas,” 515–23, who includes Thomas in the beatitude of v. 29. Although she does not devote detailed attention to the disciples in 20:19–23, Hulen reacts to the widespread notion that they are examples of true faith. She shows that as “characters” in the Johannine narrative, the disciples remain “ambiguous.” They “are people who always seek to gain understanding” (“Disciples,” 226).

28. See Brendan Byrne, “The Faith of the Beloved Disciple and the Community in John 20,” *JSNT* 23 (1985): 83–97. See also Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, NCB (London: Oliphants, 1972), 602: “He (the author) is concerned that *the reader* should believe, and sets the Disciple whom Jesus loved before him as the first example for him to follow.”

not see and yet believe (v. 29), have an advantage. They have been provided with “the Writing” that Peter and the Disciple whom Jesus loved did not yet know (v. 9).

Jesus did many signs, but they have not been *written* (*gegrammena*) in this book (v. 30). There is a purpose behind the selection of the signs that has been *written* (*gegraptai*) “so that *you* [later generations of disciples who have not seen, but have this story], may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (v. 31). This “Writing,” *not yet* available for the Disciple whom Jesus loved (v. 9), is available to those who are reading John’s story of Jesus and in the ears and hearts of those who are hearing it or seeing it performed. Their blessing (v. 29) is part of John’s rhetoric of persuasion.²⁹ Living in the time of the absence of the physical Jesus, they are in a more advantageous position than those who had access to his bodily presence: Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and Thomas. They also have an advantage over Peter and the Disciple whom Jesus loved, who returned to their homes, not yet knowing “the Scripture” (*tēn graphēn*) that Jesus must rise from the dead (vv. 9–10). They have “the Writing” (*tēn graphēn*, v. 9), *written* for them (*gegraptai*, vv. 30–31).

THE CHARACTERS IN JOHN 21

John has dismissed Peter and the Beloved Disciple (20:10), but they return to play key roles in 21:1–25.³⁰

(1) Peter has lost interest in what has gone before: “I am going fishing” (21:3). When he is informed by the Beloved Disciple that the personal calling to the fishermen from the shore “is the Lord,” he leaps into the water (v. 7), and he hauls the net ashore when Jesus asks for some of the fish (v. 11). The reader/listener recognizes such actions as typical of his enthusiasm (see 6:66–69; 13:6–10, 36–38) but knows that he has failed (18:15–18, 25–27). On the basis of a threefold profession that he loves Jesus “more than these,” Peter reverses his abandoning of the Jesus-story (vv. 1–3).³¹

29. See the essay “Persuasion” by Ruth Sheridan in this volume.

30. For a more detailed analysis of the role of Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John 21, see Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John*, 176–89.

31. See Francis J. Moloney, *The Resurrection of the Messiah: A Narrative Commentary on the Resurrection Accounts of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Paulist, 2013), 121–22, 134 n. 63.

He is appointed the shepherd of Jesus's flock, symbolized by the catch of many fish and the fact that the net is not torn apart (see 19:23–25a).³² The narrator's comment in verse 19a, catching up themes and words that spoke of the future death of Jesus (see 12:33; 18:32), informs the reader/listener that Peter will lose his life in a fashion that matches the death of Jesus (vv. 15–18).³³

(2) The Beloved Disciple's actions are minimal and entirely positive, as his role is never ambiguous. He is not mentioned in the original group of disinterested fishermen in verses 1–2, and he thus appears on the scene surprisingly in verse 7 where he informs those disciples: "It is the Lord." Peter responds (vv. 7–18), but as he "follows" Jesus (v. 19), he turns and asks a question that bothered those who were reading and hearing this story. Seeing the Beloved Disciple also "following," he asks "What about this man?" (vv. 20–21). This is a pivotal question on the final page of a story where Peter has always been a leader (1:41–42; 6:67–69; 20:2–10), albeit a somewhat ambiguous one (13:6–11; 18:15–18, 25–27). Whenever Peter and the Beloved Disciple appear together, the former is always upstaged by the latter (13:22–25; 18:15–18; 20:2–10). The Johannine community is asking the question placed on the lips of Peter: "What about this man?" (21:21). Addressing the world *outside the text*, in a period *after* the death of Peter (vv. 18–19) and *after* the death of the Beloved Disciple (vv. 22–23), the narrator answers the question of verse 21: what about this man? The Beloved Disciple is their witness; the one who has written these things, through whom they have received their authoritative Jesus-story (v. 24).

John 21 has provided a response to the unresolved question of the respective roles of Peter and the Beloved Disciple.³⁴ Another "resolution," however, that is seldom noticed is the bleak situation of the two foundational disciples who "as yet did not know the Scripture" (20:9). The story

32. For a comprehensive study in support of this claim, see Culpepper, "Designs for the Church," 369–402.

33. See Moloney, *Love in the Gospel of John*, 183–84. See also D. Francois Tolmie, "The (Not So) Good Shepherd: The Use of Shepherd Imagery in the Characterisation of Peter in the Fourth Gospel," in Frey, van der Watt, and Zimmermann, *Imagery in the Gospel of John*, 352–67, esp. 363–67.

34. For a more comprehensive survey of the many points of continuity and resolution between 1:1–20:31 and 21:1–25, 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, RBS 55 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 237–51.

of the subsequent Johannine church must be based on more solid authority than these disciples who disappeared from the story as they returned home after their experiences at an empty tomb (20:9–10). The situation is resolved in 21:15–24: Peter will profess unconditional love and eventually experience a death that will glorify God (vv. 15–18). The Disciple whom Jesus loved, who has also died, is the one who has “written these things” (vv. 19–24). One is the authoritative shepherd and the other is the witness.³⁵

CONCLUSION

John is not *primarily* interested in the “character” or the “characterization” of the Beloved Disciple, Peter, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, or the disciples in John 20–21. His gospel is directed to its audience, those who have not seen, yet believed (20:29).³⁶ It is at this point that John 21 falters in its role as “closure” for the Johannine story. There are many indications across 1:1–20:31 that this gospel has been written for those who do not see yet believe, *readers and listeners who receive the text but who experience the absence of Jesus*. This is especially clear in the Johannine use of sacramental material (3:3–5; 6:51–58; 13:1–38; 19:31–37),³⁷ its teaching on the Paraclete (14:16, 25–26; 15:26–27; 16:7–11, 12–15),³⁸ the need for Jesus to depart (14:1–4, 27–31; 16:4–7, 16, 19–21, 28), and in such editorial interventions as 1:1–18 and 19:35.³⁹

In 21:1–25, Mary Magdalene, Thomas and the disciples do not play a role. The issue of believing without seeing has disappeared from the Johannine rhetorical agenda, and thus the faith experience of these foundational

35. See Moloney, *Resurrection of the Messiah*, 121–26; D. Moody Smith, “When Did the Gospels Become Scripture?” *JBL* 119 (2000): 12–13.

36. As R. Alan Culpepper, “The Weave of the Tapestry: Character and Theme in John,” in Skinner, *Characters and Characterization*, correctly observes: “In a sense, each of the characters is a ‘plot functionary,’ and it is important to take note of the ways characterization, theme development and the rhetorical design of the gospel narrative are intertwined” (35).

37. Francis J. Moloney, “When Is John Talking about Sacraments?” *ABR* 30 (1982): 10–33.

38. Francis J. Moloney, “The Gospel of John: A Story of Two Paracletes,” in *The Gospel of John: Text and Context*, ed. Francis J. Moloney, *BibInt* 72 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 241–59.

39. On 19:35, see Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 505–6, 509. It is important to recognize that 1:1–18 is a massive authorial intervention directed to readers and listeners.

figures is unimportant. But Jesus must return to the story to bring Peter and the Beloved Disciple out of their homes (see 20:10), to establish them respectively as shepherd (Peter) and witness (Beloved Disciple). In 20:17–18, the risen Jesus spoke of his imminent return to his Father but that has been postponed in 21:1–23. John must address readers and listeners about a matter of concern: the nature of the community (vv. 3–18) and the respective roles of Peter (vv. 15–18) and the Beloved Disciple (v. 20–24).

John's story of *Jesus* ended in 20:30–31, but that was not the end of the story of *the Johannine disciples*. The implied author whose narrative, christological, and theological strategies direct the rhetoric of 1:1–20:31 wanted to convince readers that the Scriptures had been fulfilled in the glorification of Jesus through his death and resurrection (19:23–37, esp. vv. 28–30), and he had left the *graphē* of his story of Jesus as a witness to that fulfillment (20:9, 30–31). What had been selected from the tradition had been “written” that all who did not see might believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and have life in his name (20:30–31).⁴⁰ But, as we know from subsequent Johannine literature (1, 2 and 3 John), the Johannine disciples were troubled by the unanswered questions concerning the nature and mission of the community as well as questions of leadership and authority.⁴¹ The story of Jesus had come to an end, but another story had begun. The implied author of John 21 called upon other Johannine traditions concerning the risen Jesus to generate that story.⁴²

The addition of the epilogue was pastorally effective, as the ongoing presence of John 21 within Christian literature indicates. But it has altered

40. See Francis J. Moloney, “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” *CBQ* 67 (2005): 454–68.

41. This sentence accepts that the Johannine letters appeared after the Fourth Gospel. Although widely accepted, especially in the light of the authoritative work of Raymond E. Brown (*The Epistles of John*, AB 30 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982], 47–115), this position is by no means universal. For a good example of the contemporary debate, see R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson, eds., *Communities in Dispute: Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles*, ECL 13 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), especially Culpepper, “The Relationship between the Gospel of John and 1 John,” 95–122. The most comprehensive recent challenge has come from Udo Schnelle, “Die Reihenfolge der johanneischen Schriften,” *NTS* 57 (2013): 114–44.

42. See William S. Vorster, “The Growth and Making of John 21,” in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck*, ed. Frans van Segbroek, Christopher M. Tuckett, Gilbert Van Belle, and Jos Verheyden, 3 vols., BETL 100 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 2207–14.

an important element in the rhetoric of the earlier narrative. A post-Easter Christian reader has been led from 1:1 to 20:31 to see the blessedness of the one who believes in Jesus as the Christ the Son of God and has life in his name because of what has been “written” (20:30–31), despite the *absence* of Jesus.⁴³ In an ideal world, there is no need for the return of the ascended Jesus to guide the church with Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and the other disciples. Jesus has ascended to the Father to establish a new situation where his disciples are his brethren, children of God (see 1:12; 20:17).⁴⁴ Another Paraclete is with the followers of Jesus and will be with them (see 14:16–17, 25–26; 16:7–11, 12–14) until Jesus returns to take them to his Father’s dwelling place (see 14:2–3, 18–24).

But Johannine disciples do not live in an ideal world. Despite the importance of “departure” and “absence” for the Christology of John 1:1–20:31, they need instructions from the risen Lord, still present, to guide them as they live the in-between-time.⁴⁵ Thus the Fourth Gospel appeared in its present form: John 1:1–21:25. Behind John 1–21 lie two implied authors communicating slightly different points of view through the voice of a single narrator.⁴⁶ John 21:25 hints that the early Christian community which listened to and read John 1:1–20:31, despite its conviction that “the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25), experienced the need to add more to the story it already had as a treasured part of its story-telling tradition.

43. I have come to regard 21:1–25 as a “necessary epilogue,” but I suggest that John 1:1–20:31 has an internal rhetoric of its own (i.e., without 21:1–25), in leaving the questions of community and leadership (Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple) unanswered. This rhetoric matches the closure of the Gospel of Mark in 16:8, inviting post-Easter disciples to “fill the gaps” in their response to the presence of the risen Jesus. On this, see Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 339–54.

44. See Frances Back, *Gott als Vater der Jünger im Johannesevangelium*, WUNT 2/336 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 1–24, 195–99.

45. Aptly caught by Hooker, *Endings*, 80: “There is something odd about John’s ending; whereas in Mark the risen Christ never made an appearance, in John he never departs.”

46. On this notion of two implied authors writing for a single readership, see Zumstein, “Endredaktion des Johannesevangeliums,” 288–90.