

The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel. By David R. Beck. Biblical Interpretation Series 27. Leiden: Brill, 1997, 145 pp. + bibliography and indexes. \$65.00.*

This interesting, well-written book advocates the thesis that anonymity functions in the fourth gospel as a literary device to highlight the ideal features of a given character in the narrative. Applied to the motif of discipleship, anonymity marks out a particular protagonist as exemplary in terms of that person's faith in Jesus. In his seminal work *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, R. A. Culpepper proposed more than 15 years ago that this device is operative in the case of the gospel's "disciple Jesus loved." The author of the present work has now applied this principle consistently to John's entire narrative.

Beck discusses the following anonymous figures "with extended portrayals and narrative significance" (p. 137) in the fourth gospel: the mother of Jesus (chap. 2); the Samaritan woman and the royal official (chap. 4); the infirm man (chap. 5); the woman caught in adultery (chap. 8); the blind man (chap. 9); and the disciple Jesus loved (chaps. 13, 19–21). For each of these characters, Beck attempts to demonstrate his thesis that the fourth gospel's significant anonymous characters model the "paradigm of appropriate response to Jesus," which Beck defines as "an active faith response to Jesus' word without a sign or the need to 'see' and bearing witness to the efficacy of Jesus' word to others" (p. 133). Moreover, Beck contends that the converse is also true: named characters, even where portrayed favorably, are not offered as models for reader emulation.

After having laid the groundwork for his study in the initial chapters, Beck launches his detailed investigation in chap. 4 with an analysis of the prologue, the witness of John the Baptist, and Jesus' call of his disciples. The first character significant for the author's thesis, the mother of Jesus, is treated in chap. 5. Beck sees in her a response of "faith and witness, even without full comprehension" (p. 58). This seems unobjectionable. But is the name Mary suppressed in order to encourage reader identification, as Beck contends? Or does the fourth evangelist not mention Mary's name because he assumes his readers' familiarity with it or for some other reason? And in any case, how plausible is the assumption that the gospel's first readers would have considered "the mother of Jesus" an "anonymous character"? Moreover, while the mother of Jesus is not "named" in John's gospel, does not the designation "mother of Jesus" still constitute a concrete identification that falls short of complete "anonymity"? Beck thinks that his exhaustive focus on reader impact renders any treatment of such issues unnecessary, since they are at least in part bound up with authorial intention. But may reader impact not be part of authorial intention? It seems that the dichotomy underlying Beck's attempted appropriation of reader-response theory is entirely too rigid to yield balanced and reliable interpretive conclusions.

But it is the infirm man of John 5 that presents the greatest obstacle for Beck's thesis (chap. 6). Contrary to the almost universal consensus of Johannine scholarship that views this man in negative terms, Beck strains to retain the notion of this man's positive characterization. Nevertheless, in the end Beck only manages to "choose[s] to retain the ambiguity of the man's portrayal" (p. 89). However, even if this assessment is granted, "ambiguity" still is different from a positive portrayal worthy of emulation. And what precisely are John's readers encouraged to imitate? Certainly not the man's "betrayal" of Jesus to the Jewish authorities (5:11). It seems doubtful whether Beck himself would have seen in the infirm man of chap. 5 a positive character if his thesis had not required him to construe this figure in such terms. Then again, when all is said and done, Beck concludes that "[t]he contrast between positive and negative assessments of the man's actions reflects different extratextual choices by readers" (p. 89). So who is to know? Positive, negative, or ambiguous — it is all in the eye of the beholder.

Despite these serious methodological concerns, I have benefited considerably from reading this book. The author's perceptive discussion of narrative detail has great potential for sharpening the

apprehension of John's narrative intentions. Nonetheless, the volume raises serious concerns regarding the evangelical appropriation of reader-response criticism, which must now be addressed in further detail.

The first concern pertains to the author's apparent full embrace of reader-response theory. If Beck's endorsement of this approach is subject to any qualifications, one would not know from reading this book; no critique of reader-response theory is provided. At the very outset, Beck postulates that all any interpreter can ever claim to achieve is "*a* reading, not *the* reading of a text," referring to reader-response theorists such as Fish, Fowler, Iser and Segovia (pp. 3–5). Having thus banished himself at the very outset to an island of interpretive solipsism, on what basis does Beck expect his readers to keep reading? At best, he may commend his "readings" as suggestive, creative or interesting. But by failing to give due consideration to the determinacy of authorial intention as expressed in a given text for that text's meaning, he has abandoned any possibility of criteria for valid interpretation from the start. The exclusive consideration of reader impact and the consistent setting aside of authorial intent also appear to jeopardize the notion of the authority and morally compelling force of Scripture.

The second concern relates to the author's rigid insistence on reading John's gospel solely within its own frame of reference. At no level is any attempt made to relate the fourth gospel to the Synoptics or the Christian canon as a whole, nor are matters of background engaged that are not explicitly referred to in the text. This self-imposed limitation to the text, nothing but the text, and only the text seems artificial, if for no other reason than that an emphatic "reading between the lines" is often required to pick up nuances or connotations conveyed by a given phrase. At times, Beck's refusal to entertain any notions relevant to interpretation not made explicit in a given text borders on the idiosyncratic (e.g. pp. 44, 46 regarding 1:19, 35–40 or pp. 113–114 regarding 13:23).

Third, while something can certainly be gained by focusing on anticipated reader responses, the question of checks and balances looms large. For example, what in the Samaritan woman does John enjoin his readers to imitate? Is it merely her believing response to Jesus and her telling others about him? Or does John intend this character to "strike a resonant chord with readers whose extratexts include the experience of disenfranchisement, either by gender, ethnicity, or consequential life choices—choices they may feel were beyond their control" (p. 78)? Again, it seems that, once authorial intention has been jettisoned as determinative for meaning, there are only "readings," with no criteria available to adjudicate between alternate interpretations.

Fourth, is the whole notion of "anonymity" adequately demonstrated in its ancient, first-century context, or is it a far more sophisticated literary notion arising from fairly recent genres such as the modern novel? How can Beck be sure that John's readers, or subsequent readers over the centuries (not to speak of John's authorial intention itself, which, of course, is of no concern for Beck in the present study), even so much as recognized "anonymity" in those terms as significant? This, of course, is only one particular instance of overexegesis and anachronism that I find characteristic of much of literary-critical methodology in general.

Fifth, when Beck identifies a name as a barrier for reader identification, what about other characteristics such as the designation "the mother of Jesus" or "a man born blind"? To cite but one example: When Beck states regarding the "disciple whom Jesus loved" that "[n]othing is revealed of his familial relationships, social standing, occupation, physical condition, or his past," this characterization is reminiscent of the book of Hebrews' casting of Melchizedek as "without father, without mother, without genealogy" (7:3; p. 136). Yet Melchizedek is *named*; it is simply that several *other* significant characteristics are not provided in the respective narrative, an omission that enlarges the potential for a given reader to fill in the narrative space with imagination. For this reason a theory that focuses unilaterally on the presence or absence of a name at the exclusion of other identifying traits appears unduly narrow.

Sixth and last, is Beck's thesis correct? I am not certain that it is not, but I have considerable

doubt that it is. To begin with, the sample size of only seven significant anonymous characters in the fourth gospel — six if the adulterous woman of chap. 8 is eliminated, and she should be on textual grounds — is very small, which renders a definite verification of Beck's hypothesis precarious. Moreover, in light of the above stated reservations, a more nuanced assessment seems called for. It is *probable* that "the disciple Jesus loved" has ideal aspects encouraging reader identification; it is *possible* that the mother of Jesus, the Samaritan woman, the royal official and the blind man do; but it is *doubtful* whether the infirm man does. Of course, Beck himself is not interested here in the question of how anonymity relates to authorial intention. But for those of us who are, reality turns out to be more complex than Beck's monolithic theory. To be sure, at times John may refrain from naming a given character for the purpose of reader identification; at other times, however, he may do so for other reasons, such as the insignificance of the person's name, his reader's presumed familiarity with it, or his ignorance of it; or a combination of these factors may be at work. And who is to say that John sought to discourage reader identification (positive *or* negative) in the case of *named* characters (such as Jesus or Judas) or unnamed *groups* (such as the disciples or "the Jews")? These questions remain.

If a work is as strong as its thesis, this book falls short of persuading. If a work is as reliable as its methodological foundation, I have serious reservations. If a work has some redeeming value if it is well-written and yields some interesting insights, this book may still benefit those unconvinced by its thesis or skeptical regarding its method.

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