

Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design, by R. Alan Culpepper. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983. 266 pp. \$19.95.

This book is extraordinarily important. It belongs to a rare breed, the breed that breaks new ground in biblical studies. Culpepper is the first to apply the insights and methods of the new "literary criticism" or "rhetorical criticism" in a full length monograph to the Gospel of John.

Culpepper's primary indebtedness is perhaps to Seymour Chatman (*Story and discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978] and Gérard Genette (*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* [trans. Jane E. Lewin; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980]; but he has read widely in the area of literary criticism, especially the literary criticism of the novel. His aim is to analyze the fourth gospel as a whole, as a complete literary work, using the categories of such criticism. Mainstream johannine scholarship has been interested in looking for tensions, aporias, inconsistencies to aid in the separation of levels of tradition. Such analysis is followed by the attempt to serialize the traditions thus discovered in order to isolate a trajectory of theological development in the johannine community. But Culpepper avoids all such questions and examines the Gospel of John as a finished, literary product, a narrative world into which the reader is drawn. "Meaning is produced in the mental moves the text calls for its reader to make, quite apart from questions concerning its sources and origin" (p. 4). In successive chapters, then, Culpepper takes us through considerations of "Narrator and Point of View," "Narrative Time," "Plot," "Characters," "Implicit Commentary," and "The Implied Reader." These elements are tied together in a comprehensive diagram (a slight revision of Chatman's work).

How these topics are developed by Culpepper can best be conveyed by a couple of examples. In the second chapter, "Narrator and Point of View," he begins by distinguishing three terms. The *real author* refers to the person or persons who actually wrote the fourth gospel. The *implied author* "is always distinct from the real author and is always evoked by a narrative. The Gospel of John, therefore, has an implied author simply by virtue of its being a narrative" (p. 15). The *implied author* is an ideal or literary figure who may be inferred from the sum of the choices that constitute the narrative. He or she is a created version of the real author, and sometimes a subset of the real. The *narrator* is a rhetorical device, the voice that actually tells the story. The narrator *may* be dramatized as a character in the story; alternatively, the narrator may be undramatized, in which case the line between the narrator and the implied author becomes thin, though never entirely obliterated. The narrator actually tells the story, addresses the reader and resorts to explanatory asides—in short, is

intrusive in the narrative.

The narrator of the fourth gospel, Culpepper argues, adopts omniscience as his psychological point of view. In literary criticism, this does not mean that the narrator is, like God, literally omniscient, but that he adopts a stance that enables him to provide inside information and views on what the characters are thinking, feeling, intending, believing and so forth. Culpepper finds such evidence in passages like this: "But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it . . ." (6:61); "No one at the table knew why he said this to him" (13:28); "When Pilate heard these words, he was the more afraid" (19:8); and much more of the same. Similarly, there is a kind of "omnipresence" to the narrator: he is "present" in some sense as an unseen observer at the interview between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, because he is able to record what went on, to tell "what no historical person could know" (p. 26). Moreover, this narrator clearly writes retrospectively (e.g., 2:20-21; 7:39).

Based on this analysis, Culpepper proceeds to examine relationships between the narrator and Jesus (e.g., he finds both "omniscient," and notes how the narrator so determines the language and idiom that both persons speak with exactly the same voice), and between the narrator and the implied author (here Culpepper embarks on a rather important study of 21:24-25).

Subsequent chapters are no less significant, and cumulatively prove extremely thought-provoking; but I must now turn to some preliminary assessment and critique.

My first reservation concerns the unqualified transfer of categories developed in the poetics of the *novel* to Gospel literature. Culpepper is not entirely insensitive to the problem, of course; but in my view his defense of his methods is not very convincing. The heart of his answer is essentially twofold. First, although he concedes that "[the] danger of distortion must be faced constantly when techniques developed for the study of one genre are applied to another," nevertheless he insists that "in principle the question of whether there can be a separate set of hermeneutical principles for the study of Scripture should have been settled as long ago as Schleiermacher" (pp. 9-10). In one sense, this is entirely correct; but in no sense is it relevant to the problem posed. The question at stake is not whether or not we must examine the literary conventions of Scripture in the light of the literary conventions of other literature, but whether the modern novel is the best parallel to first century gospels. True, as Culpepper points out, there are indeed parallels between the Gospel of John and "novelistic, realistic and narrative"; but Culpepper makes no attempt whatever to isolate the *discontinuities*. To take one easy example, Culpepper subsumes discussion of the eyewitness themes in John under the narrative categories of *narrator* and *implied author*, without seriously considering that if the witness themes are given force within some narrative framework other than the novel, the shape of the discussion *inevitably* swings to *some* consideration of the kind and quality of the *history* purportedly being told, and therefore to truth claims—and not just to the shape of the *story* being narrated.

Culpepper's second line of defense is the argument of Hans Frei in his

important work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei argues that the Enlightenment drove western thought to assess the truthfulness of narratives in exclusively *historical* terms. This "crisis of historical narrative," Frei argues, led the Germans to develop higher criticism and thus to question the *truthfulness* of the gospel narratives; but it led the English to invent the novel, which conveys its own kind of "truth"—not truth *qua* historical facts or chronicle, but some deep insight into reality, constructed in historically more or less specific contexts. Therefore the way forward, Culpepper argues, in an age when many thoughtful people "cannot accept as historically plausible [the gospel's] characterization of Jesus as a miracle worker with full recollection of his pre-existence and knowledge of his life after death" (p. 236), is not to restrict truth to *historical* truth and therefore reject the truth claims of the gospel, but to recognize the peculiar nature of *narrative* truth. Culpepper is not saying that the fourth gospel's narratives convey *nothing* of history; rather, he wants to preserve some sort of blend. "The future of the gospel in the life of the church will depend on the church's ability to relate both story and history to truth in such a way that neither has an exclusive claim to truth and one is not incompatible with the other" (p. 236). Yet not only does his example of miracles in the life of Jesus fail to inspire confidence (Could the resurrection be thrown into the list of negotiables? If not, why not?), but he gives no criteria at all to guide us, as if the division is immaterial. His favorite analogy is more uncontrolled yet. He does not want the Gospel of John to be thought of as a window on the ministry of Jesus, enabling us to see *through* the text to that life and ministry, but as a mirror in which we see not only ourselves but also the meaning of the text that lies somewhere *between* the text and ourselves, "and belief in the gospel can mean openness to the ways it calls readers to interact with it, with life, and with their own world. It can mean believing that the narrative is not only reliable but right and that Jesus' life and our response mean for us what the story has led us to believe they mean" (p. 237). But "reliable" and "right" in what sense? If in *some* historical sense, we have been returned to our window—i.e., the narrator "reliably" tells us some things about Jesus' ministry; but if purely in the sense of the "reliability" of the novelist, we have sacrificed the gospel's claims to certain historical specificity, and set sail on a shoreless sea of existential subjectivity. In that case the meaning may be in the story, the story that *we* perceive, the story that stands on *our* side of the text; but it tells us nothing of the ministry of Jesus on the *other* side. I am not of course arguing for the view of history associated with von Ranke ("wie es eigentlich gewesen ist"); but I am certainly arguing that "the eclipse of biblical narrative" cannot be overcome by appealing to the novel. Indeed, if this view prevailed in its strongest form, what would be communicated to the reader would not be the gospel at all; for the gospel is irretrievably bound up with God's self-disclosure and redemptive sacrifice in the person of his Son within the space-time continuum that constitutes history. The "narrative truth" that a novel conveys is judged in terms of its universality (e.g., the depiction of *universal* human foibles, tensions, fears, loves, hates, relationships, etc. found in *every* age and society); and the historically specific contexts of such literature estab-

lish frameworks of more or less verisimilitude but do not constitute the "universal" element for which the writing is praised. By contrast, the gospels are universally applicable to men, *not* because they portray a central figure who is just like the rest of us, but precisely the reverse: they depict a unique figure who alone can save us, and who scandalously invades humanity's existence at a specific point in the space-time continuum. Doubtless he is continuous with us in many ways; but to say only this is to say too little. To have faith in the gospel message is not the same thing as responding positively to the story of Superman, who is also said to invade the space-time continuum from beyond. Although biblical faith has a major "subjective" or "personal" or "existential" component, it depends also on its object—on the other side of the "window." Biblical Christianity cannot outlive the "scandal of historical particularity." By contrast, the novel thrives on the universals of human existence.

The dominant influence of the poetics of the novel on Culpepper's thinking and the consequent clouding of his exegetical judgment can be traced at scores of points. For instance, the treatment of the so-called "omniscience" of the writer is slanted to fit the patterns generated by fiction writers; but on the face of it, any responsible observer could draw reasonable conclusions about what Jesus knew, or his disciples did not, or what Pilate feared, from the actions they took and/or the words they said. I read many modern biographies that do not hesitate, on responsible grounds, to tell us what their subjects feared, thought, loved, supposed. And if the narrator of the fourth gospel was not historically privy to the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, this scarcely means he should be classed as an "omnipresent" narrator in a fiction story; for after all, there are other ways of learning about a conversation between two people besides being there—the more so in this case where we are specifically told how freely the woman talked about the entire episode (cf. 4:29,39,42). Certainly the fourth evangelist is far more reserved in these matters than, say a nineteenth century Victorian *novelist*, most of whom were given to the most minute probing of their subject's psyche. Or again, although Culpepper says some very insightful things about John 21:24-25, some of his judgments spring from his adoption of fiction poetics as a Procrustean bed in which every scrap of evidence must be forced to lie. Maintaining the distinction between the real author (the evangelist) and the implied author (who is the "superior version" of the real author), Culpepper takes 21:24 to mean that the evangelist (the real author) also identifies this superior self (the implied author) with the beloved disciple. "When the narrator dramatically pulls the curtain on the implied author in the closing verses of the gospel, the reader recognizes that the Beloved Disciple fits the image the gospel projects of the implied author as one who knows Jesus intimately . . ." (p. 47). Note how this sort of analysis forgets that distinctions among "real author," "implied author" and "narrator" are to some extent artifices to enable us to perform certain types of closer analysis; now, however, the three are almost hypostatized. More important, if the Gospel of John is not *a priori* condemned to the poetics of fiction, the same evidence and arguments might be used to forge the conclusion that the evangelist *actually was* the beloved disciple.

All this seems to me to be a further painful reminder of the epistemological impasse into which a substantial proportion of modern critical biblical scholarship has got itself. There is everywhere a deep desire to preserve some sort of genuinely pious attachment to Christianity, while working on historical-critical levels with such powerful post-Enlightenment impulses that no epistemologically responsible grounding for the piety is possible. The result is two-tier thinking—epistemological bankruptcy.

But there is an unforeseen benefit that flows from Culpepper's work. Any approach, like his, that treats the text *as a finished literary product* and analyzes it on that basis calls in question the legitimacy of the claims that layers of tradition can be peeled off the gospel in order to lay bare the history of the community. If aporias, say, can be integrated into the source-critical approach of R. T. Fortna, they can also be integrated into the literary unity of R. A. Culpepper. If aporias may be literary devices, they are no *necessary* evidence of seams. In other words, Fortna and Culpepper in one sense represent divergent streams of contemporary biblical scholarship—so divergent, in fact, that a debate has begun about which approach to the text should take precedence. Culpepper has no doubts: "Once the effort has been made to understand the narrative character of the gospels, some reapproachment with the traditional, historical issues will be necessary" (p. 11). But the problem is deeper than mere precedence. If the material can be responsibly integrated into the unity Culpepper envisages, or something like it, what right do we have to say the same evidence testifies to *disunity*, seams, disparate sources and the like? Conversely, if the latter are justified, should we not conclude Culpepper's discovery of unity *must* be artificially imposed? The unforeseen benefit from this debate, then, is that it may free up the rather rigid critical orthodoxy of the day and open up possibilities that have illegitimately been ruled out of court.

In short, this is an important book, not because it has all the answers, but because it will set much of the agenda for years to come.

D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Deerfield, Illinois