

WHO IS “THE READER” IN/OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL?

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The Fourth Evangelist did not compose the final version of his Gospel with a modern reader in mind. Similarly, while the Evangelist wrote a Gospel narrative for the members of a given community at the end of the first century, he had no control over how they would respond to the narrative.

The Implied Reader

Within the text itself there is a reader who emerges as the tale is told. He is twice addressed as “you” (see 19:35; 20:31).¹ This so-called implied reader is an *intratextual* phenomenon.² The implied reader knows what has already been read: the words, sentences, paragraphs and pages. The reader waits for the next word, sentence, paragraph and page to discover what the narrator has to tell.³ The implied reader, therefore, is not a person but a heuristic device used to trace the temporal flow of the narrative. The reader emerges as a forward-looking textual effect who also knows and recalls what has happened and has been revealed in the story so far.

The unexplained reference to the resurrection in 2:22 and the author’s statement of intention in 20:30-31 show that the implied reader is credited

¹The narrator addresses the implied reader in the plural in 19:35 and 20:31. G. Prince (*Narratology. The Form and Functioning of Narrative* [Janua Linguarum Series Maior 108; Berlin/New York/Amsterdam: Mouton, 1982] 16-26) uses the presence of “you” in texts as the sign of the narratee. Narratee and implied reader must sometimes be distinguished in modern narratives, but the two coalesce in the Fourth Gospel.

²As the implied reader is a textual effect “it” is not a person, a “he” or a “she”. Yet the author composes a narrative in such a way that the implied reader emerges from the narrative, *as if the reader were personal*. For a good summary of the implied reader in contemporary literary theory, see W. S. Vorster, “The Reader in the Text: Narrative Material,” *Semeia* 48 (1989) 22-27.

³See S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) 26-27; 43.

with some knowledge of Jesus' story.⁴ But the reader has no knowledge of the *Johannine version* of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Statements about "the hour" of Jesus (2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1; 19:27) his being "lifted up" (3:14; 8:28; 12:32) and his glorification (7:39; 12:16) can only puzzle the implied reader. Knowledge and understanding of the Johannine story evolves as the narrative unfolds.

The implied reader is part of the spatial gaps and temporal flow of the narrative itself.⁵ However, the Christian tradition of reading the Bible, and the community of readers through the ages which produced the Bible, presupposes that a relationship is established between the implied reader *in* the text and the real reader *of* the text. The relationship may sometimes be uncomfortable. The text may produce pleasure, pain, ambiguity and even hostility, but some form of relationship between an implied reader in the text and a real reader of the text must exist.⁶

This reference to the Bible leads me to remark that our narrative is a Gospel. The structures and terminology detected and defined in recent times in literary circles come from scholars who are working with

⁴There is a well known textual difficulty associated with the tense of the verb *pisteuein* in 20:31 whose solution I have presupposed in this affirmation. I am accepting the present subjunctive as the better reading, and thus maintaining that the author leads a believing implied reader through a narrative which summons to greater belief. On the textual problem, see R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB 29-29a; New York: Doubleday, 1966-70) 1056, and R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (HTCNT IV/1-3; London/New York: Burns & Oates/Crossroad, 1968-82) III, 338. Both of these scholars opt for the present subjunctive, and Schnackenburg claims that even if the text is aorist it would not be "ingressive". It would indicate "a new impulse in their faith".

⁵Following, among many, the indications of R. M. Fowler, "Who is 'the Reader' in Reader Response Criticism?" *Semeia* 31 (1985) 10-15. See also B. C. Lategan, "Coming to Grips with the Reader in Biblical Literature," *Semeia* 48 (1989) 3-17. S. D. Moore (*Literary Criticism and the Gospels* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989] 84-95) points out that the "reader" may best be described as a "listener". My presentation of a virginal experience of the narrative applies equally well to a listener, as Moore (pp. 87-88) acknowledges. He exaggerates the "Gutenberg galaxy" theory (see p. 95). The great patristic commentaries were pre-Gutenberg but belong more to the modern galaxy than the aural-oral one imagined by Moore. See G. Steiner, *Real Presences. Is there anything in what we say?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989) 30-31.

⁶On this relationship, see W. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983²) 137-44, 294-95.

narrative *fiction*.⁷ The Gospel of John is not a narrative fiction in any ordinary sense. Whatever the historical value of the narrative of the Fourth Gospel, it was not creatively invented in the same way that a novelist or a story-teller composes narratives.⁸ The text of the Fourth Gospel had a long history before it came to be presented in its final form. This history had its beginnings in the event of the person of Jesus of Nazareth ... however imaginatively the subsequent tradition handled that event.

Thus, although it is perfectly legitimate to attempt to read the Gospel of John, received and transmitted to a further generation as a narrative text, it should not be simply that. The diachronic and synchronic go hand in hand in a reading of the Fourth Gospel because of its witness to Jesus Christ. Adela Yarbro Collins rightly insists that we

give more weight to the original historical context of the text. This context cannot and should not totally determine all subsequent meaning and use of the text. But if, as I am convinced, all meaning is context bound, the original context and meaning have a certain normative character. I suggest that Biblical theologians are not only mediators between genres. They are also mediators between historical periods.⁹

Tracing the implied reader can justifiably be a search for a construct produced by a long story-telling tradition (synchronic) which had its beginnings in Jesus (diachronic).

Paul Ricoeur has insisted that both fiction and history are narrative.¹⁰ While it is tempting to distinguish between empirical narrative which refers to controllable data and fictional narrative which does not, Ricoeur points out that both forms of narrative make referential claims, and are not to be distinguished on this basis.¹¹ "Every day we are subjects of a narrative, if not heroes of a novel".¹²

⁷See, for example, the clear description of the project by W. Iser, *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 3-19.

⁸For the classical statement on the uniqueness of biblical narrative, see E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 3-23.

⁹A. Yarbro Collins, "Narrative, History and Gospel," *Semeia* 43 (1988) 150, 153. See also J. Barton, "Reading the Bible as Literature: Two Questions for Biblical Critics," *Literature and Theology* 1 (1987) 135-53.

¹⁰P. Ricoeur, "The narrative function," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (ed. J. B. Thompson; Cambridge: University press, 1981) 274-96.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 288-296. A forceful defence of the unity between fiction and history in the biblical narratives is found in M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of*

The shape of the narrative of the Fourth Gospel gives a broad hint that the author has composed it for a reader. He opens his Gospel with a key to the mystery of God and Jesus which stands behind the narrative of the Gospel story (1:1-18).¹³ Thus instructed, the reader is in a narrative. The author has given his reader the full facts about Jesus Christ's original union with God and his revealing role in coming from such origins into the human story (see 1:9-11, 14, 18).

The narrative which follows, however, is full of characters who have not read the prologue. Indeed, many of them "misunderstand" Jesus when he utters his great revelations (see, for example, 1:38; 2:19-20; 3:3-4; 4:10-11; 6:32-34; 18:37-38). The author is not telling these stories to inform his reader about past events or characters from the life of Jesus. He is not *primarily* interested in the disciples, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, "the Jews" or Pilate. He is interested in his reader's being called to decision in the light of what has been told in the prologue. Indifference is out of the question. The reader stands either on the side of Jesus, by accepting all that he has come to make known in terms of his being the one who tells God's story (1:1-18), or on the side of those who regard such revelation as incredible or as nonsense.

Throughout the Gospel the narrator makes important comments upon the narrative which are directed towards the reader (see, for example, 2:21-22, 23-25; 3:31-36; 4:43-45; 5:1, 9b; 6:4; 7:2; 10:22). The use of this commentary by an author to speak directly to his reader is one of the clearest indications of the author's "point of view".¹⁴ While some modern and contemporary narratives may use the technique to lead the reader astray temporarily, this never happens in the Gospel of John. What the narrator communicates directly to the reader through commentary is a reliable representation of the overall point of view of the omniscient author.¹⁵

Biblical Narrative. Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 23-35.

¹²G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980) 230.

¹³R. H. Lightfoot—C. F. Evans (ed.), *St. John's Gospel* (Oxford: University Press, 1956) 78. See also C. K. Barrett, "The Prologue of St. John's Gospel," in *New Testament Essays* (London: SPCK, 1972) 27-48.

¹⁴See the indications of such commentary in M. C. Tenney, "The Footnotes of John's Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 117 (1960) 350-364; R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 17-18.

¹⁵My chief objection to the brief study of J. L. Staley (*The Print's First Kiss. A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth*

This author, finally, informs the reader that he is bearing personal and authentic witness to the blood and water flowing from the side of the pierced Jesus "that you also may believe" (19:35). The same call to faith comes even more solemnly at the end of the narrative. The book has been written to call the reader, who already knows the story of Jesus, into deeper faith: "These things are written that *you may go on believing* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). The "you" in this statement refers to the implied reader, not to the characters in the story ... nor the Johannine community nor the real reader, in the first instance.

The implied reader in a narrative is always communicating with the real reader of the narrative, *as the narrative unfolds*. A message is transmitted, but the real reader may not always receive the transmission equally well. When we misread what is being transmitted, there is no communication. Sometimes we only receive the communication partially as a result of our careless or distracted reading. Nevertheless, there are times when we receive the transmission exactly. This happens when we are reading in tandem with the implied reader, caught up in the flow of the narrative. In these situations we sometimes may not like what the implied reader transmits to us, so we change stations or switch off. But often we are attracted by the transmission, and thus go on receiving. Two thousand years of reading indicates that the Church has been attuned to the transmission of the Johannine implied reader, and has thus gone on receiving.

Contemporary literary studies have taught us sensitivity to the reader who gradually emerges as the narrative unfolds, but gospel criticism must not abandon the pursuits of historical-critical scholarship which has devoted great attention to the rediscovery of the experience of the Johannine community. The interpreter's role is to "mediate between historical periods" (Adela Collins). The *historical* intended reader was addressed by a *historical* real author through a narrative. The modern interpreter of the narrative is also conditioned by his *historical* context. A neglect of history leads to the danger of a new fundamentalism.

The Intended Reader: The Johannine Christians

Historically, the encounter between a real author and the Johannine Christians bore fruit. We have the Fourth Gospel in the Christian Bible because this was the case. Although the real author *of the narrative* is

Gospel [SBLDS 82; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988]) is his over-subtle introduction of an implied author who plays tricks with the implied reader. On the reliability of the Johannine narrator, see R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 32-33.

beyond our scientific control, his intentions are reflected in the implied author *in the narrative*. The same can be said for the implied reader *in the narrative* and the intended reader *of the narrative*.

Recent diachronic scholarship has made considerable progress in the rediscovery of the experience of the Johannine Community.¹⁶ As we are dealing with a Christian community, we can take it for granted that classical messianic terminology would have been applied to Jesus of Nazareth at a very early stage. There would have been a gradual refinement and deeper understanding of this terminology with the passing of time. But the use of such language within the Johannine community to speak of Jesus would have created early tensions between the Christian group and the local representatives of Israel.

There are, however, numerous indications in the Gospel that the Johannine Christians took further initiatives creating even more tensions, which prepared the way for the final breakdown between themselves and their original heritage found within Judaism. The concentration on the mission to the Samaritans in chap. 4 is a strong indication that the community had begun to develop an understanding of Jesus which transcended Judaism and its Temple (see especially, the implications of 4:20-24). The Samaritan villagers eventually come to confess: "We have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world" (4:42).

The introduction of non-Jewish elements caused a great deal of the theological development of the early Church. One needs only to think of the problems behind the writings of Paul and Matthew. The introduction of Samaritans and Hellenists into the Johannine group would have caused its members to look again at their understanding and their preaching of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. A shift in meaning of the term from the Jewish messianic use of "son of God" to a more personal understanding of "Son of God" expressing Jesus' unique union with a God whom he called "my Father" (see especially 5:17) would have been unacceptable to a Jewish audience, and the similar use of the "I am" expression to refer to Jesus (see 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5) would have met similar opposition.

The mounting tension between the Johannine community and post-war synagogue Israel seems eventually to have led to a complete expulsion from the Synagogue. The evidence for this final rift is most clearly recovered from the description of the experience of the man born blind in chap. 9. A growing faith in Jesus is shown through the

¹⁶What follows is a summary statement of my understanding of the history of the community behind the finished Gospel. For an earlier survey, see F. J. Moloney, "Revisiting John," *ScrB* 11 (1980) 9-15.

progression of the ex-blind man's understanding of Jesus. In 9:11 he describes Jesus as "the man called Jesus". In v. 17 he goes further, claiming that "He is a prophet". After further interrogation and abuse, he states, in v. 3: "If this man were not from God". Having reached the important Johannine moment of wondering about Jesus "origins" (from God), he is "cast out" (v. 34: *exebalon auton exō*). Jesus enters the story once again and calls the man, now formally "cast out" of the Synagogue, to express his faith in Jesus, the one whom he sees and hears, as the Son of Man. The man falls on his knees and confesses: "Lord, I believe" (vv. 35-38).

The background for this expulsion from the Synagogue has already been provided for the reader in the "the Jews'" interrogation of the blind man's parents. They refuse to speak for their son as "They feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if one should confess him to be the Christ, he was to be put out of the Synagogue" (v. 22). The expression "to be put out of the Synagogue (*aposunagōgos genētai*) is found only in the Fourth Gospel (see also 12:42 and 16:2).

The final rift between the Johannine community and official post-70 A.D. Judaism is reflected in the story of the man born blind. It is also to be found in the other places where the process of putting Christians out of the Synagogue is mentioned (12:42 and 16:2). This breakdown between a Christian community and the Synagogue would have been experienced throughout the communities of the early Church. However, the Gospel of John records its own experience by making direct reference to it. The final rift did not come until some time after 85 A.D. when the Synagogue at Yavneh, set up after the disastrous war of 65-70 to restore a shattered Israel, had to deal with the presence of those who believed that the Messiah had already come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Under the leadership of Rabbi Gamaliel II, it was decided to exclude all those who believed that Jesus was the Christ.¹⁷ The expulsion from the

¹⁷On this decision, see W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: University Press, 1966) 256-315. See, however, J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM Press, 1985) 67-93. For the position adopted above, see the analysis of the Rabbinic material in F. Manns, *John and Jamnia: How the Break Occurred between Jews and Christians c. 80-100 A.D.* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1988), and K. Wengst, *Bedrängte Gemeinde und verherrlichter Christus. Der historische Ort des Johannesevangeliums als Schlüssel zu seiner Interpretation* (TS 3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener-Verlag, 1983²) 45-73. See also R. Kysar, "The Fourth Gospel. A Report on Recent Research," 2426-28; T. Onuki, *Gemeinde und Welt im Johannesevangelium* (WMANT 56; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener-Verlag, 1984) 29-37 and D. M. Smith, "Judaism and the Gospel of John," in *Jews and Christians*.

traditional Synagogue practices of Israel, experienced by the Johannine community, has been dramatically described in the story of the man born blind.¹⁸

Once the Johannine community had been forcibly cut away from its Jewish roots, then even further modifications of the Johannine Gospel seem to have taken place. An originally Jewish-Christian community now had to continue its life within the context of a developing hostility with official Judaism. This is the reason for the apparently negative use of the term "the Jews" throughout the Gospel.¹⁹ As followers of Jesus Christ they had to find their way, living and preaching a Christian message in a strange new world. They had either to develop an approach and openness to this world, or close in on themselves and live as a Jewish sect. A decision to be missionary would have led to contact with the syncretistic Hellenistic religions. Some early form of what would eventually become Gnosticism was part of this world.

There are exaggerations on both sides of the debate about John's contact with Hellenistic religions, and especially early Gnosticism. The Fourth Gospel transcends all these categories in a re-telling of the Christian story. Bultmann would claim that the discourses in the Fourth Gospel come from a christianised gnostic source,²⁰ while E. Käsemann would argue that John was a naive docetist gradually leading the Christian

Exploring the Past, Present and Future (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Shared Ground among Jews and Christians 1; New York: Crossroads, 1990) 83-88. As D. Rensberger (*Johannine Faith and the Liberating Community* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988] 26-27) has remarked, 9:22, 12:42 and 16:2 are clear. Even if it was only a local problem, members of the Johannine community were being expelled from the synagogue.

¹⁸See the now classical study of J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979²) 3-41.

¹⁹The Johannine use of the expression "the Jews" (*hoi Ioudaioi*) says nothing about Israel as a nation or Judaism as a way to God. The term arises from the concrete experience of a given Christian community which is experiencing opposition and pain from a group of people who have literally "shut the door" on them as a sign of their total rejection of the claims which the Johannine story makes for Jesus. Throughout the Gospel the opposition between Jesus and "the Jews" arises from his claims to have a remarkable oneness with God. The Johannine Jesus and "the Jews" are two sides in a christological debate. The implied reader is asked to commit himself to the side of Jesus, a position which the real author also wished his intended reader to adopt.

²⁰See R. Bultmann, "Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums," *ZNW* 24 (1925) 100-46, and Idem, *John*, passim.

story towards Gnosticism.²¹ Neither is correct. The community itself is making a journey from an old world into a new world, and John must tell the old story in a new way. While there are many indications of contact with Hellenistic religions and an early form of Gnosticism, the essential story of the saving revelation of God in Jesus through his life, teaching, death and resurrection remains firm.²²

The experience of the Johannine Christians was not only one of receiving a new way of telling the old story. Action was demanded of them. They saw clearly that as Christians they could not possibly remain in the Synagogue (see 12:43-44). Gradually they developed an independent understanding of the primacy of love, rather than of authority. For this reason there is a consistent "upstaging" of Peter by the Beloved Disciple in the narrative (see especially 13:21-26 and 20:2-10). The community became more aggressive in its gradual development of a new and higher Christology. Jesus is presented as the Logos, the Son of God "sent" by the Father from "above" to "below" in a way quite unknown to the Synoptic Gospels. There is a development of a special Paraclete pneumatology, an ethic based on love, without the restrictions of final judgment of one's behaviour at the end of time. One has life "now" in the acceptance or refusal of the gift offered by God in the revelation brought by his Son, Jesus (see, for example, 5:19-26). The Fourth Gospel is marked by a realised eschatology, although the traditional end-time eschatology has not been entirely abandoned (see esp. 5:27-29; 6:38-40, 54).

The finished narrative of the Fourth Gospel, addressed to the implied reader, demands a commitment to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (20:30-31). Did the implied reader, who emerges as the text unfolds, resonate with the Johannine community, the intended reader, whose troubled history in the early Church can now be traced with reasonable

²¹E. Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus according to John 17* (London: SCM Press, 1966) 4-26. For a summary of this discussion, considering both its presuppositions and consequences, see K. W. Tröger, "Ja oder Nein zur Welt. War der Evangelist Johannes Christ oder Gnostiker?" *TV 7* (1976) 64-66.

²²See K. W. Tröger, "Ja oder Nein zur Welt...", 61-80. See the reflections of G. W. Macrae, "The Fourth Gospel and *Religionsgeschichte*," *CBQ* 32 (1970) 13-24.

confidence? The survival of this Gospel narrative is a positive indication that it did.

The Community's Journey and the Real Reader

The real author summons his intended readership into a deeper appreciation of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (20:30-31). In writing his Gospel the Fourth Evangelist used the stories about Jesus told and re-told in the Johannine community throughout its long life, from its earliest Jewish Christian days, down to its expulsion from the Synagogue into its mission in a new world.

Behind this story-telling stands the figure of the Beloved Disciple (whether or not he was John the Son of Zebedee need not be decided here).²³ His appreciation of Jesus of Nazareth stands at the beginnings of the Johannine tradition. His ability to re-read, re-tell and re-teach that tradition, without betraying the fundamental elements of the Christian message is one of the main features of the developing christological faith within the community. He challenged his community in his own time. After his death (see 21:21-23), these Christians were prepared to go on facing their new situation, re-reading, re-telling and re-teaching the heritage left them by the Beloved Disciple. This is what the author of 1 John means when he reminds his community of "that which was from the beginning, which we heard" (1 John 1:1) and "This is the message which you have heard from the beginning" (3:11).²⁴

The Gospel of John has been written in an attempt to preserve and instruct by making the older traditions understandable to a new Christian

²³In a recent study, J. K ugler, (*Der J nger den Jesus Liebt. Literarische, theologische und historische Untersuchungen zu einer Schl sselgestalt Johanneischer Theologie und Geschichte. Mit einem Excurs  ber die Brotrede in Joh 6* [SBB 16; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988] 456-88) using narrative techniques, has argued that the Beloved Disciple is an "inner-text" reality, and cannot be identified with any figure outside the text. In narrative terms, the Beloved Disciple is the intratextual narrator in the text. But this does not render the historical question irrelevant. See the recent study of K. Quast, *Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Figures for a Community in Crisis* (JSNTSS 32; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989).

²⁴On this, see R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; New York, 1982) 97-100 and I. de la Potterie, "La notion de 'commencement' dans les  crits johanniques," in *Die Kirche des Anfangs. Festschrift f ur Heinz Sch urmann zum 65. Geburtstag* (eds. R. Schnackenburg - J. Ernst - J. Wanke; Leipzig: St. Benno-Verlag, 1977) 379-403.

generation. The real author tells an old story in a new way.²⁵ It was inevitable that many of the experiences of the community where the real author had heard the story told, and where he had told it himself, would shape the way in which the final product would emerge. The "story of Jesus" as we now have it told in the Fourth Gospel is the result of the journey of faith of a particular Christian community in the second half of the first century. The experience of the Johannine community, and the rich theological vision which it has produced has been caught in a narrative directed to an implied reader via an implied author and a narrator. However slight our knowledge of the real author might be, he wrote a narrative for his intended readers so that they might face "the problem of relating the givenness of the past with the exhilarating experience of the present".²⁶

Such reflections are important for our approaching the Fourth Gospel as "real readers". This text has come down to us in its present form because it was received and handed on by the intended reader, the Johannine community. The narrative of the Fourth Gospel is still read in the late 20th century. The test of its relevance lies in its ability to speak to the faith experience of its real readers.

As Seymour Chatman describes it: "When I enter the fictional contract I add another self: I become an implied reader".²⁷ Does the record of Jesus Christ which we receive from the past in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel have anything to say to the exhilarating and sometimes frightening experience of our own time? Do we "enter the fictional contract" of this particular story of Jesus? How close is our journey and our faith experience to the journey and faith experience of the implied reader in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel? These are the questions which will determine the ongoing relevance of the story told in this Gospel. They can only be answered by a reading of the text during which a relationship between the implied reader, and the experience of intended readers and the real reader is established.²⁸

The reader of the Fourth Gospel cannot be limited to the implied reader, the Johannine community as the original intended readers of the

²⁵See the overview of possible sources for the "ideolect" of the Fourth Gospel in T. Onuki, *Gemeinde und Welt*, 19-28. See also S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (New Accents; London: Methuen, 1983) 86-89.

²⁶M. D. Hooker, "In His Own Image," in C. Evans - M. D. Hooker, *What about the New Testament. Studies in Honour of C. Evans* (London: SCM Press, 1975) 41.

²⁷S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) 150.

²⁸See G. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 210.

text, or to the real reader with the text in hand today. As R. M. Fowler has summarised: “The reader has an individual persona (mine), a communal persona (the abstracted total experience of my critical community), and a textual persona (the reader implied in the text)”.²⁹ All must play their part in an ongoing reading of the Fourth Gospel within the Christian community.

The relevance of this text today arises from the relationship established between the implied reader and the real reader. Rightly Iser claims that “the meaning of a literary text is not a definable entity but, if anything, a dynamic happening”.³⁰ The evolving and emerging textual effect of the implied reader from the text initiates such mutuality, not the knowledge, the doctrines, the wisdom, the faith, nor the experience of the real reader.³¹

A series of encounters links the origins of the Johannine story with today’s reader. The Jesus event gave birth to the Johannine community. At a given moment the real author decided to shape his narrative to meet certain needs within the community. In doing this he created an implied author, a narrator and an implied reader, the fruit of his choices and decisions. These choices and decisions, however, were determined by his vision of the needs of the community for which the narrative was shaped. The implied reader, that heuristic device which enables us to sense the temporal flow of the narrative, is therefore shaped by, but not identical with, the intended reader. It represents not so much what the intended reader *was*, but what the real author *wanted the intended reader to become*. Thus arises the intimacy between the real author, the implied author and the narrator. The implied reader reflects the real author—implied author—narrator’s deepest *desires* for a historical Christian community.

Once the narrative existed, the Johannine community entered into a dialogue with the implied reader as it began to read or listen to the text. In doing this the intended reader came into contact with the *desire* of the narrator. This dialogue was fruitful and the narrative transaction proved significant enough to exceed the bounds of its own time and place. Eventually the narrative came to form part of the Christian New Testament. In this way later readers entered into dialogue with the implied reader and they, in their own turn, came into contact with the narrator’s desire. And so the process has continued for almost 2000 years.

²⁹R. M. Fowler, “Who is ‘the Reader’ in Reader-Response Criticism?”, 21.

³⁰W. Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 22.

³¹A deconstructionist approach to narrative is beyond the scope of my study but could be introduced at this stage.

The experience of reading a classical text through the centuries indicates that a hard and fast definition of "the reader" is impossible.³² A classical narrative is still read today by real readers. We continue to enter into dialogue with the implied reader and we find value in it. In so far as we continue to enter the narrative transaction and find value in it, we also enter into communion with the intended reader. The intended reader both *is* and *is not* the implied reader. The real reader both *is* and *is not* the implied reader. Also, the real reader both *is* and *is not* the intended reader. At the point of "*is*" the construct of "the reader" is born.³³

Yet, as the liberation and feminist theologians are showing, some contemporary real readers of biblical texts are unhappy with the *desire* of the real author, communicated through the centuries by means of the fictional contract. There is an increasing number of contemporary real readers who cannot identify with many biblical implied readers. Nevertheless, even here the narrative may continue to be relevant because of the antipathy and ambiguity which it creates. Relationships between the implied reader and the real reader need not always be favourable, but a relationship there must be.³⁴

Conclusion

"If ... all meaning is context-bound, the original context and meaning have a certain normative character Biblical theologians are not only mediators between genres. They are also mediators between historical periods".³⁵ A reading of the Fourth Gospel should attempt such a mediation by allowing the mirror of the narrative world of the text to reflect a point of view to the world in front of the text. Throughout, however, one must maintain contact with the world behind the Gospel which can be seen through the window of the text. Paradoxically, the text is both mirror and window.

In many ways the implied reader has privileges which the real reader cannot share. The implied reader is integral to the journey which is told

³²For a critical survey, see S. D. Moore, *Literary Criticism*, 97-107.

³³These four paragraphs arose from discussions with Mark Coleridge. See, for some parallel reflections, B. C. Lategan, "Coming to Grips with the Reader," 9-13.

³⁴This hermeneutical principle has been highlighted by the liberationist and feminist readings of the New Testament. Biblical narratives often produce implied authors, narrators, narratees and implied readers which reflect an oppressive ideology or androcentrism unacceptable to some contemporary readers. This problem has led to the development of a specifically liberationist or feminist hermeneutic.

³⁵A. Yarbro Collins, "Narrative, History, and Gospel," 150.

through the narrative; the real reader may have a different experience. When the narrator speaks, without explanation, of Jewish traditions, feasts and their liturgies, the implied reader is aware of all that is suggested; many real readers are not. The implied reader is assumed to know Greek and to understand double-meaning words, which many real readers do not.³⁶ The implied reader has some knowledge of Jesus' death and resurrection (see 2:21-22; 21:30-31), but not of the Johannine version of it. The implied reader is hearing this for the first time in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel.

We real readers may find that our response, in dialogue with the experience of almost two thousand years of Christian life, often resonates with that which results from the unfolding relationship between the implied author and the implied reader in the Johannine Gospel.³⁷ As Honoré de Balzac's narrator informs his implied reader at the beginning of *Père Goriot*: "You may be certain that this drama is neither fiction nor romance. *All is true*, so true that everyone can recognise the elements of the tragedy in his own household, in his own heart perhaps".³⁸ On the other hand we may find (and no doubt many do find) that such a response is fatuous in our real world of men, money and machines. But that is not the only thing that might happen. Sometimes we may have a further response which is independent of the implied reader, and thus outside the control of the author. It is unavoidable that our response, either of empathy or antipathy, will be the result of our privileged position as the recipients of almost 2000 years of the Christian practice of reading the Fourth Gospel.³⁹

³⁶See R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 212-23; S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 117-19.

³⁷A. M. Solomon, "Story upon Story," *Semeia* 46 (1989) 3.

³⁸H. de Balzac, *Old Goriot* (Penguin Classics; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951) 28.

³⁹Unacceptable is the judgment of G. Steiner, *Real Presences*, 40: "The Torah is indeterminately synchronic with all individual and communal life. The Gospels, Epistles and Acts are not". See pp. 40-45.