

# Signs and Discourses in John 5 and 6

Edited by  
JÖRG FREY and  
CRAIG R. KOESTER

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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# Signs and Discourses in John 5 and 6

Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings  
from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2019 in Eisenach

Edited by

Jörg Frey and Craig R. Koester

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## Foreword

This is the fourth volume of essays produced by the Colloquium Ioanneum, an international group of established Johannine scholars, which held its fourth biennial meeting in Eisenach, Germany from August 5–9, 2019. Whereas previous meetings were held at Patmos, Ephesus, and Jerusalem, places associated with the story of the Gospel or the tradition about its composition, Eisenach is linked to the reception history of John. It was at the Wartburg, which overlooks Eisenach, that Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German in 1521.

Each meeting of the Colloquium focuses on a specific section of John's Gospel. Participants are invited to approach the text from different perspectives and using different interpretive methods. Sessions in 2019 centered on John 5 and 6. These chapters are distinctive in that they are structured in similar ways. Each begins with accounts of one or two miraculous "signs," which are followed by an extended discourse that elaborates the theological implications in contexts marked by controversy. John 5 and 6 are an especially fruitful section for critical dialogue because they bring together many of the most disputed issues in Johannine research.

In narrative studies, character portrayal has been a major focus of investigation. Interpreters recognize the importance of Johannine characters in conveying the Gospel's message, yet they differ as to whether the writer portrays a figure like the invalid at the pool in John 5 or the crowd in Galilee in John 6 in primarily positive or negative terms, and to what extent a mixture of traits might be involved. Contributors to this volume adopt various approaches when analyzing the portrayal of Jesus and his disciples, including comparisons of John and Mark, consideration of how intertexts from Isaiah and other biblical writings might shape the perspectives of the readers, and exploration of the way models from the Greco-Roman world might contribute to interpretation. Tensions around the portrayal of Judas and his role in the Johannine narrative are also considered. Fresh attention is given to the way space is constructed in the narrative, shaping the readers' perspective on the settings in which the story unfolds.

Christology and eschatology are deeply connected in Jesus's speech in John 5. Interpreters have long debated how the speech's references to judgment and eternal life might be understood alongside its use of apocalyptic images, which have a more futuristic orientation. In this volume, consideration is given to the way the depiction of Jesus's narrative audience can enhance interpretation, and how John's portrayal of Jesus as judge encompasses both present and future

dimensions. A major aspect of the speech is Jesus's claim to work on the Sabbath as his Father does. Essays in this volume consider what these works entail, whether they support the charge that Jesus is making himself equal to God, and how Jesus's claim to be completing his Father's work might actually fit within a broader theme of creation – an often neglected theme in Johannine research.

Jesus's words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood are offensive to the audience depicted in the narrative. Using various interpretive angles, the contributors look at this disputed section of John 6, exploring the role of Eucharistic traditions, how the language might be linked to the Gospel's insistence on the reality of the incarnation, and the extent to which it points to the offense of Jesus's crucifixion. Together, the essays offer a multifaceted look at major topics of importance for current Johannine studies.

The Colloquium Ioanneum expresses thanks to the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa for its partnership with the Colloquium. We are also grateful to Andrew Bowden (Munich/Mainz) who tended the comprehensive editing of the whole volume and compiled the bibliography and indexes, and to Michael Jost (Zurich/Cambridge) for his editorial work with the German articles. We want to thank the staff at Mohr Siebeck, in particular Tobias Stäbler and Bettina Gade, for the helpful and professional management of the production process.

Zürich / St. Paul, Mn., in December 2020

Jörg Frey and Craig R. Koester

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# The “Man at the Pool” and the “Man Born Blind”

## Comparison in the Lives of Plutarch and the Gospel of John

*George Parsenius*

Major characters in the Gospel of John are often joined in pairs. Peter and the Beloved Disciple are the best-known duo, and they interact with one another in various ways in various episodes, especially in the famous final scene in chapter 21. Other figures are linked together in a similar way, such as the pairings of Mary/Martha, Nicodemus/the Samaritan woman, and Thomas/Mary Magdalene. Less famous, but no less obvious, is the pairing of the blind man in John 9 and the lame man healed at the pool in John 5. Scholars have shown how closely these two characters are connected and have evaluated the significance of each individual figure by exploring their relationship to one another.<sup>1</sup> That these two figures should be read in concert seems clear. The purpose of their pairing is less certain. What are we to learn from comparing them? This question will be addressed in the present essay, but this question also begets an even larger question regarding all of the paired sets in John: Why does the Fourth Gospel join its characters in sets of two? Scholars have responded to this situation in various ways in the history of scholarship, and the present essay will interact with previous discussions by reading John’s narrative together with the *Lives* of Plutarch. Plutarch also combines characters in pairs that are designed to encourage comparison. By seeing how comparison operates in Plutarch, we will shed light on how comparison operates in John.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1983), 137–38; idem, “John 5:1–18: A Sample of Narrative-Critical Commentary,” in *The Gospel of John as Literature*, ed. Mark W.G. Stibbe, NTTS 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 193–207. See also the article of Christos Karakolis in this volume; Jeffrey L. Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark, Reaching for the Light: Character in John 5 and John 9,” *Semeia* 53 (1991): 55–80; J. Ramsey Michaels, “The Invalid at the Pool: The Man Who Merely Got Well,” in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tormie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 337–46.

## 1. Opposing Views on the Lame Man at the Pool

The lame man healed at the pool in John 5 is obscure. Both his behavior and his motivations are described very sparingly. One thing seems clear, though. The circumstances of his healing are strikingly similar to the circumstances of the blind man healed by Jesus in John 9. R. Alan Culpepper lays out a series of 11 points of comparison that make clear the association between the healing of the lame man in John 5 and the blind man in John 9, as follows:<sup>2</sup>

	<i>Lame man</i>	<i>Blind man</i>
1. Length of illness told	(5:5)	(9:1)
2. Jesus heals	(5:6)	(9:6)
3. A pool mentioned	(5:2)	(9:7)
4. Jesus heals on Sabbath	(5:9)	(9:14)
5. Jesus accused of violating Sabbath	(5:10)	(9:16)
6. Healed man interrogated	(5:12)	(9:15)
7. Man uncertain about place/identity of Jesus	(5:13)	(9:12)
8. Jesus finds man	(5:14)	(9:35)
9. Sin linked to suffering	(5:14)	(9:3)
10. Man encounters the Jews	(5:15)	(9:34–35)
11. Jesus does “works” of Father who sent him	(5:17)	(9:4)

The various points of connection listed here correspond very tightly, although in a few notable places the association is one of similarity-in-difference. Jesus apparently connects illness to sin in John 5:14, for example, but he denies such a connection in John 9:3.<sup>3</sup> Other points of disparity exist as well, especially in the outcomes of the two stories. In contrast to the healing in John 9, which leads to discipleship and worship of Jesus, we are never told that the man in John 5 believes in Jesus – or even thanks him. Where the man in John 9 has a clear connection to Jesus at the end of the episode, the man in John 5 is left in limbo.

This lack of specific detail about the results of the healing in the life of the lame man leads interpreters to arrive at differing, even opposing views, as they evaluate whether or not the lame man is a positive example of faith in Jesus. Michael Theobald views him as a negative example of faith.<sup>4</sup> Physical health, Theobald argues, is not to be equated for John with spiritual health. Being healed does not mean being saved. Moreover, true faith must have some consequence for those

<sup>2</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 139–40. The descriptions of the eleven categories here listed are abbreviated from Culpepper’s actual descriptions.

<sup>3</sup> Udo Schnelle resolves this tension by saying that illness might, but need not, be the result of sin. Only Jesus knows the proper understanding of the past, and what matters is not the past, but the future life of faith for each person, regardless of their differing pasts (Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 5th ed., THKNT [Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016], 142).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12*, RNT (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009), 380.

who profess it, as we see in the case of the blind man. The lame man in John 5, however, merely identifies Jesus as his healer. He just says the name of Jesus. He does not profess faith in that name. Culpepper has a similar perspective. He views the man in John 5 as an example of poor faith. He may even betray Jesus. Culpepper writes, "The man does not even know who healed him, but he is ready to blame his violation of the sabbath on his benefactor."<sup>5</sup> Culpepper recognizes, of course, that the man's circumstances might be more complex when he says, "To what extent his naivete or dullness is culpable may be debatable, but there is little with which to excuse him."<sup>6</sup>

Christos Karakolis sees the opposite.<sup>7</sup> Karakolis ingeniously sees great meaning in the duration of the man's illness. Sick for thirty-eight years (5:5), the man healed at the pool suffered for as long as Israel dwelt in the wilderness when it was punished for disobedience (Deut 2:14). The healed man is, thus, a symbol of Israel on the path to true faith in Jesus Christ. Jeffrey Staley sees the same positive example of faith in the lame man, but for different reasons. For Staley, the absence of explicit condemnation spells vindication. No one ever denounces the man, Staley argues, so readers should not denounce him either. Staley writes, "[Neither] the narrator nor Jesus condemns him, either explicitly or implicitly ... Perhaps he is ... a character who serves in his own way, with his own theological argument, as a faithful witness to a sign performed."<sup>8</sup>

For Staley, then, the very ambivalence that surrounds the man is a positive sign, and yet he is led to this position by the same shortage of information that leads Theobald and Culpepper in the opposite direction. For Culpepper and Theobald, the lack of specific detail meant a lack of faith, while for Staley, the want of any specific critique of the man implies that he is not to be viewed negatively.

These two polar opposites are not the only options for interpreters. For some scholars the ambiguity is the very point of the story. Udo Schnelle suggests that the man is described in limited detail because he has a merely limited role, a role that is purely functional on the level of narrative dramaturgy. The lame man is a means to an end. He is the catalyst who causes Jesus to heal on the Sabbath, and so enflame the growing tensions with the leaders of Israel. The man is described simply, because his role is very simple.<sup>9</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels says the same of the lame man, but he even denies him a clear narrative role. He refers to the man at the pool without any color or description as "the man who got well," and insists that nothing further can be known. He writes, "All that can be said of him is what is said over and over again in the text – that he 'got well.' No faith, no new birth,

<sup>5</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 138.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>7</sup> See the essay by Karakolis in the present volume.

<sup>8</sup> Staley, "Stumbling in the Dark," 63.

<sup>9</sup> Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 118–19.

no lasting forgiveness. Any of these – or on the contrary, ‘something worse’ – could lie in his future, but it is all left to the reader’s imagination ....”<sup>10</sup> But he is not only ambiguous for lack of detail. It is also that there are both good and bad things in his portrayal. Marianne Thompson sums this matter up nicely when she says, “The man’s actions are somewhat ambiguous. By reporting Jesus to the authorities, he has not only borne witness to Jesus’s power to heal, but he has also (inadvertently?) become the occasion of escalating hostility toward Jesus.”<sup>11</sup>

This ambiguity is something to which we will return repeatedly, both in John and in Plutarch. The ambiguity, I think, is not an accident, but intentional. Schnelle is correct to say that the man in John 5 is a means to an end, and I think that this designation applies to more than merely dramaturgy. The lame man plays not just a dramatic role but also an ethical one. He is a catalyst to deeper reflection on the nature of true discipleship. Some people in John are clearly to be read positively, like the blind man in John 9. Others are clearly to be read negatively, like the people who crucify Jesus. We are to imitate the one and to avoid the other. The purpose of the lame man in John 5 is different. He is neither to be imitated nor avoided but contemplated. He compels us to reflect further on what it means to be a disciple. To argue one way or the other regarding the figure in John 5, scholars have had to reflect on what discipleship really means. This is certainly what the lame man has done in the history of interpretation, as the opinions surveyed above demonstrate. I suggest that this is John’s purpose in painting the man in John 5 in ambiguous colors.

Two things are true, therefore, of the lame man in John 5. First, he is meant to be compared to the blind man in John 9, and second he is depicted in a spare, ambiguous fashion. I will argue in what follows that these two factors are meant as catalysts for reflection on the nature of discipleship. They are complementary aspects of the man’s portrayal. Comparison and ambiguity serve the same purpose as they force the reader to reflect further on what it means to follow Jesus.

## 2. Comparison and Ambivalence in Plutarch

Comparison and ambivalent character portrayals also complement one another in Plutarch’s *Lives*. Comparison is especially important. Comparison, or *synkrisis* (σύγκρισις), is a defining feature of Plutarch’s biographical project. Every life comes as part of a pair, one Greek and one Roman, and each pair begins with a common prologue. After the prologue, the two separate biographies are sketched

<sup>10</sup> Michaels, “The Invalid at the Pool,” 346.

<sup>11</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 119.

individually, but then they are viewed synoptically again in a section labeled *synkrisis*, where Plutarch examines the two figures in tandem. Each individual figure is meant to be compared with another. They are joined at the hip, as it were. Plutarch, of course, does not invent the idea of writing biography in this fashion. Cornelius Nepos had presented *Parallel Lives* roughly a century earlier, and the idea of comparison is common in antiquity, especially in rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> But comparison plays a uniquely significant role in Plutarch's project. To understand more clearly the purpose of comparison in Plutarch, we need to say a few words first about the purpose of the *Lives* in general.

Plutarch makes the ethical emphasis of his biographies plain in his prefaces.<sup>13</sup> The life of *Alexander*, for example, begins by saying that the purpose is not merely to describe everything that Alexander ever did but to uncover his character. Like a portrait painter, Plutarch will not reproduce the whole man's life but only the aspects of his life that show his character (*Alexander* 1). What is the purpose of excavating character? The prologue to *Aemilius and Timoleon* clarifies the point when it adds the following:

I began the composition of my *Lives* for others, but I have continued and lingered with them for myself, using the narrative as a kind of mirror in some way to improve and assimilate my life to the virtue of these men. In fact it has seemed to be nothing less than living with them and sharing their lives, whenever we welcome each of them in turn like a guest through the narrative, and taking them hand in hand we contemplate them "just as he was," choosing for study the most significant and noblest of their deeds. What greater delight than this could you have, and what more dynamic in producing improvement of character? (*Timoleon* 1.1–3 [Perrin, LCL])<sup>14</sup>

It was a common fact in ancient moral formation that imitation of others was a helpful tool for improving oneself. Simon Swain writes, "A key part of Plutarch's plan for moral improvement, with the aim of constituting one's life according to philosophy, was the observation of others."<sup>15</sup> Imitation had, of course, long

<sup>12</sup> It is especially significant in speeches of praise (*encomia*). See, for example, Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1368a19–26; Quintillian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2.4.21. It became so common in rhetoric that it was included the *Progymnasmata*. See Timothy E. Duff, "Plutarchan Synkrisis: Comparisons and Contradictions," in *Rhetorical Theory and Praxis in Plutarch*, ed. L. Van Der Stockt, Collection d'Etudes Classiques II (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 141–61, here 141; For further discussion, see Donald Lemen Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1957), 198; Michael W. Martin, *Judas and the Rhetoric of Comparison in the Fourth Gospel*, New Testament Monographs 25 (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2010), 37–45.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50–250* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 138.

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, moral formation is not utterly absent in history writing. Josephus follows standard practice when he writes about the mistakes and misfortunes of Antipater following the death of Pheroras, and moralizes about them in Josephus *Jewish Antiquities*, 17.3.3; Livy, a half-century earlier in *The History of Rome*, says that the study of history affords its student an array of examples to imitate and to avoid (Preface 10).

<sup>15</sup> Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 138.

been a key catalyst in moral formation across the philosophical spectrum, and it appears in the New Testament famously in those places where Paul announces, “Be imitators of me” (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Gal 4:12; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6).<sup>16</sup> The observation of examples is also not confined to the *Lives*. Plutarch uses examples throughout his moral treatises, as even the most cursory reading will demonstrate. One of a myriad of examples makes the point, taken from the treatise *On Praising Oneself Inoffensively*, which says,

In the first place self-praise goes unresented if you are defending your good name or answering a charge, as Pericles when he said, “Yet I, with whom you are angry, yield to none, I believe, in devising needful measures and laying them before you; and I love my country and cannot be bought.” (*On Praising Oneself* 4 [De Lacy, LCL])

This is why the *Lives* focus exclusively on character. The *Lives* are not intended as history books from which a reader might learn everything a great figure ever accomplished. The *Lives* are meant to engage their readers and to urge them to live a more philosophical life. So they are selective in what they present.

This insight returns our attention to the Gospel of John for a moment. The *Lives* of Plutarch, as is now well known, are often compared to the New Testament Gospels, and this is one area where the comparison is especially close, particularly in the case of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>17</sup> The Gospel of John draws to its close with a similar apology for not recording everything that Jesus did, but being selective, and also for seeking a particular result in the reader. John writes,

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

At a certain level of abstraction, the purpose of John coincides with the purposes of Plutarch. John, like all of the Gospels, focuses on the parts of Jesus’s life that reveal his character, in the same way that Plutarch focuses on the parts of his subjects’ lives that reveal their character.

Our concern here is on another connection shared by John and Plutarch, the comparison of paired figures. If Plutarch writes about his characters as pairs and compares their lives after he writes about them, why does he do so? Plutarch seems at one point to give us a clue. He does not present only positive characters that are worthy of imitation but introduces the *Lives* of Mark Antony and Demetrius Poliorcetes by writing,

<sup>16</sup> For imitation in ancient moral formation generally, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 136–38.

<sup>17</sup> For John and biography, see Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels: A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography*, SNTSMS 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Loveday Alexander recognizes points of contact between the Gospels and ancient Lives, but also points out issues of disparity in “What is a Gospel?” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*, ed. Stephen Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13–33.

Ismenias the Theban used to show his scholars good and bad performers on the flute, and to tell them, "You should play like this man," and, "You should not play like that," and as Antigenidas used to say, "Young people would take greater pleasure in hearing good playing, if first they were set to hear bad," so, in the same manner, it seems to me likely enough that we shall be all the more zealous and more emulous to read, observe, and imitate the better lives, if we are not left in ignorance of the blameworthy and the bad. For this reason, the following book contains the lives of Demetrius Poliorcetes and Antonius the Triumvir; two persons who have abundantly justified the words of Plato, that great natures produce great vices .... (*Demetrius* 1.6–7 [Perrin, LCL])

We read, then, not only about characters to imitate but characters to avoid. At first sight, then, the point of giving us two figures together, and then comparing them, is to help us to decide which one to imitate and which one to ignore.

This is certainly one way for comparison to operate, but it is not the only way. The *Progymnasmata* textbooks actually envision the possibility of comparing figures for various purposes, including demonstrating their equality. Aphthonios writes that *synkrysis* in rhetoric refers to "comparison, made by setting things side-by-side, bringing the greater together with what is compared to it." (*Progymnasmata* 10).<sup>18</sup> Expanding on this point, Pseudo-Hermogenes writes,

Now sometimes we introduce comparisons on the basis of equality, showing the subjects we compare as equal, either in all respects or in most; sometimes we prefer one or the other, while also praising what we placed second. ... There is also a comparison with the better, where you bring in the lesser to show it is equal to the greater; for example, if you were to compare Odysseus to Heracles. (*Progymnasmata* 19–20 [Kennedy])

Comparison, then, is designed not only to demonstrate superiority but also to reflect on two topics that might be seen as equal. This is how it regularly operates in Plutarch. For instance, the very fact that Plutarch compares one Greek figure to one Roman figure has been seen as an attempt to praise the one and diminish the other. But this is not borne out by the evidence. While Plutarch does insist that virtue is an outgrowth of Greek *paideia*, Romans and Greeks are equally able to achieve the virtue that he praises. Ethnic comparison is not intended to show the superiority of one race.<sup>19</sup> The comparison of Romans and Greeks is a comparison of equality. The same is true of other comparative exercises in Plutarch outside the *Lives*. In his treatise *On Superstition*, Plutarch actually discusses two related areas of concern, superstition and atheism, and sees both of them as deviations from the mean of true piety. Although he denigrates superstition as worse than atheism, both of them are dangerous deviations from true piety. His goal in comparing atheism and superstition, then, is not merely to praise one and to demean the other. His goal is to discuss the nature of true piety.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Duff, "Plutarchan *Synkrysis*," 141. Translation from George Kennedy, trans., *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Brill; Leiden, 2003), 83.

<sup>19</sup> Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 138–40.

<sup>20</sup> Duff, "Plutarchan *Synkrysis*," 142.



This is how comparison often operates in the *Lives*. The comparison can lead to a degree of ambiguity about which figure is superior to the other. This reality has led Timothy Duff to reflect carefully on those places where the *synkrisis* is not a neat and tidy conclusion to the *Lives* but an opaque and ambiguous door into further reflection. One such place where this occurs is in the paired biographies of the Roman Lucullus and the Greek Cimon. In the biographical section, Lucullus ends his life in an opulent retirement. While Plutarch does not see this as ideal, he casts it as an attempt for Lucullus to devote himself to philosophy. After admitting that Lucullus spent his money on lavish banquets, Plutarch adds that Lucullus also made his library a place of great learning. Plutarch writes,

In these ways, then, Lucullus used his wealth wantonly, as though it were in very truth a Barbarian prisoner-of-war. But what he did in the establishment of a library deserves warm praise. He got together many books, and they were well written, and his use of them was more honourable to him than his acquisition of them. His libraries were thrown open to all, and the cloisters surrounding them, and the study-rooms, were accessible without restriction to the Greeks, who constantly repaired thither as to an hostelry of the Muses, and spent the day with one another, in glad escape from their other occupations. Lucullus himself also often spent his leisure hours there with them, walking about in the cloisters with their scholars, and he would assist their statesmen in whatever they desired. And in general his house was a home and prytaneium for the Greeks who came to Rome. He was fond of all philosophy .... (*Lucullus* 41.6–42.2 [Perrin, LCL])

This is how the matter is addressed within the biography proper. In the *synkrisis* section that follows the *Comparison of Lucullus and Cimon*, however, Plutarch sees this behavior in a less positive light, when he writes,

And further, though both alike were wealthy, they did not make a like use of their wealth. There is no comparing the south wall of the Acropolis, which was completed with the moneys brought home by Cimon, with the palaces and sea-washed Belvideres at Neapolis, which Lucullus built out of the spoils of the Barbarians. Nor can the table of Cimon be likened to that of Lucullus; the one was democratic and charitable, the other sumptuous and oriental. The one, at slight outlay, gave daily sustenance to many; the other, at large cost, was prepared for a few luxurious livers. (*Comparison of Lucullus and Cimon* 1.7–8 [Perrin, LCL])

But as soon as he censures Lucullus, he also adds that Lucullus did not die at the height of his powers, and in active service, as Cimon did, suggesting that how Lucullus spent his retirement is not so blameworthy after all. He seems to keep from praising one figure over the other, even where he might be able to do so. We are not entirely sure what Plutarch thinks.

The same happens in several other *Lives*, where the *synkrisis* takes episodes from the biographical narratives, and reads them stereoscopically in such a way that the final verdict on comparing the two figures is not a pro for one and a con for the other, but a draw. They each have virtuous qualities, given their differing

circumstances, just as, if Lucullus had died earlier, he might have lived as Cimon did. The two had different lives and different circumstances, so they are assessed in light of those differences. Duff interprets these *synkriseis* in the following way:

We should ... see Plutarch's refusal in the *synkriseis* to come down in favour of either figure as preventing the *synkriseis* from becoming a mere exercise in grading or ranking, a ritual prize-giving to whichever of the subjects might be judged superior. The *synkriseis* focus the reader's attention not so much on the individual subjects – which was a better man? – as on the virtues and vices revealed by their two lives.<sup>21</sup>

The effect of this manner of writing is that Plutarch turns the reader of the *Lives* into "the jury in the rhetorical *agon* of the *synkrisis*."<sup>22</sup> The point of the *Lives*, after all, is not to receive answers about the lives of others but to ask questions about ourselves. Plutarch is explicit on this point in some places. At the conclusion of the *synkrisis* to the *Comparison of Philopoemen and Titus*, he says,

Nobly generous, then, was the clemency and humanity which Titus showed to the Greeks, but more nobly generous was the firmness and love of freedom with which Philopoemen opposed the Romans; for it is easier to confer favors on suppliants than it is to vex with opposition those who are more powerful. But since, after this examination, the difference between the two men is hard to define, *I leave it to my reader to say* [emphasis mine] whether, if we award to the Greek the crown for military experience and generalship, and to the Roman that for justice and goodness of heart, we shall not make a fair decision. (*Comparison of Philopoemen and Titus*. (3.3 [Perrin, LCL])<sup>23</sup>

Duff writes, "The final judgment, as in other cases where a final judgement is given, is crude and disappointing. But it is just possible that the invitation to the reader might be taken as more than simply a rhetorical convention. The closing words might well be regarded as an invitation to consider what one does make of Philopoemen and Titus."<sup>24</sup> The *Comparison of Lysander and Sulla*, for example, ends in an even more ambiguous situation:

We may now consider whether we shall err very much from the truth in pronouncing our verdict that Sulla won the more successes, while Lysander had the fewer failings; and in giving to the one the preëminence in self-control and moderation, to the other, in generalship and valor. (*Comparison of Lysander and Sulla* (5.6 [Perrin, LCL])

Both figures have virtues, if in different areas. This is by far the most common way in which the comparisons end, not with a clear ranking of one figure over another but with a sense that each has some vice and each has some virtue. And this may be where Plutarch most helps us to read John.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>23</sup> Translation from Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch, Lives*, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921).

<sup>24</sup> "Plutarchan Synkrisis," 149.

### 3. Comparison in John's Gospel

Those characters like the lame man, who are presented in ways that make their status unclear, are meant to lead us to deeper reflection on the nature of discipleship. The greatest support for this suggestion is that many recent interpreters have begun to read John's paired groups in precisely this fashion.

Take, for instance, Mary and Martha in John 11 as they are discussed by Craig Koester. Mary and Martha are not only paired in the same scene and paired as sisters but they also both meet Jesus and say, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:21, 32). But where Martha greets Jesus with elementary hope in the resurrection, and is taught even more about the resurrection, Mary greets Jesus with weeping. Even so, Jesus does not disparage her. Koester writes, "Martha and Mary present two faces of grief, each of which has a place within the Christian community ... Mary's posture ... differs from that of her sister, for she fell at Jesus' feet, weeping (11:31, 33). Nevertheless, the evangelist does not seem to disparage Mary, but allows her to present another face of grief in the aftermath of death."<sup>25</sup> There is certainly no hint of the Lukan elevation of Mary over Martha (Luke 10:38–42).

Harold Attridge has also written importantly on the pairing of Thomas and Mary Magdalene.<sup>26</sup> Both encounter the risen Jesus and both are involved in touching him or not. Jesus tells Mary, "Do not touch me (Μή μου ἅπτου), for I have not yet ascended to my Father" (John 20:17). Thomas, on the other hand, is told to place his finger into the wounds of Jesus (20:27). To some, this has suggested that Mary is deficient in comparison with Thomas. But Mary Rose D'Angelo has recognized that the phrase "Do not touch me" corresponds to a similar phrase in the *Apocalypse of Moses* (*Life of Adam and Eve* in Greek; 31:3–4), where Adam says, "When I die, leave me alone, and let no one touch me (μηδεις μου ἅψηται), until the angel of the Lord shall say something about me." Mary, with a very similar phrase, is told not to touch Jesus because he has not yet returned to his Father; he is somehow in a transitional state. Following this insight, Attridge writes,

On his way back on high, [Jesus] was simply not fit to be touched ... If there was nothing wrong with Mary, she is not being marginalized or put in her secondary place by Jesus' command. She is not, moreover, being contrasted unfavorably with Thomas. After all, she does not need to touch Jesus in order to come to whatever degree of faith she achieves. Above all, she does not need to be touching him in order to do what all disciples are called upon to do: tell his story to others.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 66–67.

<sup>26</sup> Harold W. Attridge, "'Don't Be Touching Me': Recent Feminist Scholarship on Mary Magdalene," in *A Feminist Companion to John*, vol. 2, ed. Amy Jill-Levine (New York; Sheffield Academic, 2003), 140–66, here 162–64.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

Peter and the Beloved Disciple provide the pair that has received the greatest attention. In the history of scholarship on John, Peter has sometimes been said to represent either nascent Catholic Christianity or Jewish Christianity, which are seen as overshadowed by the Beloved Disciple, who represents respectively either the spirit of Protestantism or Hellenized Christianity. Richard Bauckham has written compellingly, however, on the relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. In several ways, of course, Peter seems subordinated to the Beloved Disciple. At the meal in John 13, for example, where Peter approaches Jesus through the mediation of the Beloved Disciple (13:23–24), and at the foot of the cross, when Peter has denied Christ (13:27), while the Beloved Disciple stands as a bold eyewitness to the crucifixion (19:26), Peter seems diminished in the presence of the Beloved Disciple. But Bauckham writes,

There is an important sense in which, up to and including 21:7, the beloved disciple is represented as superior to Peter. But the sense in which this is true only becomes apparent when we see that Peter and the Beloved Disciple represent two different kinds of discipleship: active service and perceptive witness .... Thus, the point of the Gospel's portrayal of Peter ... is not to denigrate Peter but to show him as the disciple who through failure and grace is enabled by Jesus to become the chief pastor of the Church. Although the Gospel does acknowledge a minor role for Peter as witness to the events of the Gospel story (20:6–7), it gives him primarily the role of shepherd. This is not at all the role of the Beloved Disciple, who therefore becomes at the end irrelevant to Peter's own call to discipleship (21:20–22) .... The Beloved Disciple is better qualified to be the author of a Gospel, but he is not better qualified to be the chief undershepherd of Jesus's sheep, which is Peter's mode of discipleship. It is worth noticing that, whereas in Peter's case, the Gospel emphasizes his love for Jesus, in the Beloved Disciple's case it emphasizes Jesus' love for him ... The different, complementary roles of the two disciples shows that it is not rivalry between different branches of Christianity ... that is at stake in their relationship.<sup>28</sup>

The most interesting case of an ambiguous character in John, though, is the figure of Nicodemus. He first appears in John 3 and is called a "leader of the Jews" (3:1), but he treats Jesus with greater respect than the other leaders of Israel. The Jewish leaders usually pursue and attack Jesus, but Nicodemus approaches him in a spirit of respect and goodwill. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God" (3:2). Later, when the leaders of Israel condemn Jesus, Nicodemus defends him. He asks that Jesus be judged fairly and he says, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" (7:51). After Jesus is executed, Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimathea at the tomb of Christ, laden with spices to anoint the Lord for burial (19:39). All of these occasions suggest a faithful disciple, and if this were all we

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2007), 85, 87.

knew about Nicodemus, we would see him in nothing but an entirely positive light. But this is not all we know.

Other features of his portrayal in the Gospel of John suggest that his status as a follower of Christ is not so stable. When he first approaches Jesus, for instance, he comes to him at night (νυκτός, 3:2). The only other person to operate at night is Judas, whose departure from the last supper is followed by the notice, “It was night (νύξ)” (13:30). If being associated with Judas is not bad enough, Nicodemus is also closely identified as well with the people whom Jesus rejects at the end of John 2. The last verses of John 2 say that Jesus has no need to be told what lies within a “person” (ἄνθρωπος, 2:25), because he knows each person, and so does not entrust himself to the people in Jerusalem – even if they believe his signs (2:23–25). It is not entirely clear what is deficient about the faith of these people in Jerusalem, and much ink has been spent in trying to resolve the matter. Regardless of the cause of their deficiency, the fact of their deficiency is certain. Equally certain is Jesus’s rejection of them. And as soon as Jesus rejects this kind of person (ἄνθρωπος, 2:25), we are introduced immediately to Nicodemus who is identified also as a person (ἄνθρωπος; 3:1). He is associated with those whom Jesus does not trust. Likewise, Nicodemus defends Jesus in John 7:50–52, but only on the basis of the Law. He does not defend him with the full confession that the man born blind will muster in John 9, after which the man born blind is expelled from the synagogue on account of his faith. Nicodemus does not attack Jesus, but neither does he fully follow. He is like those who do not profess their faith openly for fear of being cast out of the synagogue (9:22). Finally, when Nicodemus accompanies Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb to anoint Jesus for burial, he takes a hundred pounds of spices to complete the job, which is an enormous amount of material for embalming the dead. It indicates that Nicodemus expects Jesus to be entombed for good, with absolutely no hope for the resurrection.<sup>29</sup>

There is thus a tension in the person of Nicodemus. He shows signs of great faith, as well as signs of weak faith. His conversation with Jesus begins well because he honors Jesus with the title “Rabbi,” and he recognizes that Jesus comes from God. But when Jesus begins to explain the new life that he offers, Nicodemus becomes so puzzled and confused that he can only stand agape and ask (3:9), “How can these things be?” We never hear from Nicodemus again in this conversation. He simply disappears after running into the wall of Jesus’s words.

And, thus, our attention returns to the lame man in John 5. Like Nicodemus, we are not exactly sure what to make of him. In this essay, I want to suggest two modest insights from this fact. First, by comparing him to the blind man

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<sup>29</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72, esp. 54–55.

in John 9, we cannot from that alone see him as deficient. Like many of the characters in Plutarch, the comparison leads us to a state of ambiguity. The same happens with other characters in John. They are paired and even compared, but this does not mean that one should stand above the other. Further, this ambiguity may not mean that the man is merely irrelevant. It might mean, as ambiguity does in Plutarch, that this man is a catalyst for further reflection. There are some characters in John that we are clearly to avoid, like Judas. There are some characters in John that we are clearly to imitate, like the Beloved Disciple. But there are others who leave the question open, like Nicodemus and the lame man. Their purpose is to return us again and again to the question that should not only occupy us as we contemplate their lives, but also as we contemplate our own: what does it mean to be a follower of Jesus?



# The Lame Man (John 5:1–18) as a Model for the Johannine Jews

A Narrative and Reader-Response Analysis

*Christos Karakolis*

## 1. Introductory Remarks

The present essay will explore two interrelated issues: a) the characterization of the lame man in John 5:1–18 as someone who from a state of ignorance and unbelief reaches faith in Jesus and confesses him publicly; b) the function of the lame man as a representative of the Jewish people and a model for their expected course to faith, based on specific key indications in the text.

Although the words πίστις and πιστεύειν are not present in the narrative of 5:1–18, the issue of faith is central to it, as is the case with all Johannine miracle narratives.<sup>1</sup> The connection between signs and faith can be illustrated by the following sayings of Jesus: “the works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me” (5:36), and “if I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would have no sin. But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father” (15:24).<sup>2</sup> According to these and other similar passages,<sup>3</sup> the works of Jesus, which culminate in his signs,<sup>4</sup> act as testimonies that urge their recipients and eyewitnesses to believe in his person. Accordingly, the lame man’s response to Jesus as his miraculous healer is very much relevant to the birth and growth of his faith.

On the other hand, there is disagreement among exegetes about the latter part of the narrative (5:15), and whether the lame man is portrayed as a character who

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Rudolf Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 9th ed. (Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1984), 422–26; Christos Karakolis, *Η θεολογική σημασία των θαυμάτων στο κατά Ιωάννην Εύαγγέλιο* (Thessaloniki: Pournaras, 1997), 472–99.

<sup>2</sup> Both citations are from the NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> See representatively 1:50; 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:53; 5:36; 6:14; 7:31; 10:25, 37–38; 11:40, 42, 45; 12:11, 18; 14:11, 29; 16:30; 20:8, 30–31.

<sup>4</sup> See 20:30. On the relationship between “signs” and “works” in John, see Christos Karakolis, “Semeia Conveying Ethics in the Gospel according to John,” in *Rethinking the Ethics of John: “Implicit Ethics” in the Johannine Writings*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 291 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 192–212, esp. 196–200.



eventually becomes a confessor<sup>5</sup> or a betrayer of Jesus, even if unintentionally.<sup>6</sup> As has rightly been observed, our narrative is paired with the much longer and more detailed story of the blind man's healing (chap. 9) and should be read as its

<sup>5</sup> See among others G. H. C. MacGregor, *The Gospel of John*, MNTC (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 171; Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Évangile selon Saint Jean*, 5th ed. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1936), 140; Sebald Hofbeck, *Semeion: Der Begriff des "Zeichens" im Johannesevangelium unter Berücksichtigung seiner Vorgeschichte*, Münsterschwarzacher Studien 3, 2nd ed. (Münsterschwarzach: Vier-Türme-Verlag, 1970), 110 n. 75; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, HTKNT IV/1–4 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1967–1984), 2:124; Ernst Haenchen, *Das Johannesevangelium: Ein Kommentar*, ed. Ulrich Busse (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1980), 272; Leonard Theodor Witkamp, "The Use of Traditions in John 5.1–18," *JSNT* 25 (1985): 19–47, esp. 27; Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 238; John Christopher Thomas, "Stop Sinning Lest Something Worse Come Upon You: The Man at the Pool in John 5," *JSNT* 59 (1995): 3–20, esp. 18; Klaus Scholtissek, "Mündiger Glaube. Zur Architektur und Pragmatik johanneischer Begegnungsgeschichten: Joh 5 und Joh 9," in *Paulus und Johannes: Exegetische Studien zur paulinischen und johanneischen Theologie und Literatur*, ed. Dieter Sänger and Ulrich Mell, WUNT 198 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 75–105, esp. 90; Esther Straub, "Alles ist durch ihn geworden: Die Erschaffung des Lebens in der Sabbathheilung Joh 5,1–18," in *Studien zu Matthäus und Johannes: Festschrift für Jean Zumstein zu seinem 65. Geburtstag / Études sur Matthieu et Jean: Mélanges offerts à Jean Zumstein pour son 65<sup>e</sup> anniversaire*, ed. Andreas Dettwiler and Uta Poplutz (Zurich: TVZ, 2009), 157–67, esp. 164–65; Dorit Felsch, *Die Feste im Johannesevangelium: Jüdische Tradition und christologische Deutung*, WUNT 2/308 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 73–74; Johannes Beutler, *Das Johannesevangelium: Kommentar*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2016), 191.

<sup>6</sup> See among others Frédéric Godet, *Commentaire sur l'Évangile de Saint Jean*, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie française et étrangère, 1865), 21–22; Adolf Schlatter, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1962), 93; John Henry Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John*, ICC (New York: Scribner's, 1929), 1:235; Hermann Strathmann, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, NTD 4, 7th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1954), 98; J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin, *A Commentary on the Gospel according to St John*, BNTC (London: Black, 1968), 162; Wilhelm Wilkens, *Zeichen und Werke: Ein Beitrag zur Theologie des 4. Evangeliums in Erzählungs- und Redestoff*, ATANT 55 (Zurich: Zwingly-Verlag, 1969), 40, 78; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 307–08; Johannes Schneider, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, THKNT 4, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1978), 128; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 138; idem, "John 5.1–18: A Sample of Narrative Critical Commentary," in *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives*, ed. Mark W. G. Stibbe, NNTS 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 193–207, here 204–05; Dorothy A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning*, JSNTSup 95 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 99, 110, 123; Michael Labahn, "Eine Spurensuche anhand von Joh 5.1–18: Bemerkungen zu Wachstum und Wandel der Heilung eines Lahmen," *NTS* 44 (1998): 159–79, esp. 170; Rainer Metzner, "Der Geheilte von Johannes 5: Repräsentant des Unglaubens," *ZNW* 90 (1999): 181–90; idem, *Das Verständnis der Sünde im Johannesevangelium*, WUNT 122 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 53–55; Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 52–54, 90; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:644; Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 104–05; Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12*, RNT (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009), 380; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 2:220–21; J. Ramsey Michaels, "The Invalid at the Pool: The Man Who Merely Got Well," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative*

parallel.<sup>7</sup> However, due to the lame man's evident ambiguity,<sup>8</sup> as opposed to the clear and detailed depiction of the blind man's course to faith in Jesus, the question remains about whether the lame man's final narrative development should be understood under the light of chapter 9 or whether, on the contrary, it serves as a counterexample.

As mentioned above, the character development of the lame man is not the only issue of concern here. A further matter of interest is the lame man's function as a symbolic representative of and a model for the Jewish people.<sup>9</sup> We deem this a plausible reading of the narrative under consideration for the following reasons:

At the beginning of the story, the evangelist refers to an unnamed Jewish festival, Jerusalem (5:1), and the Bethesda pool, which was situated near the Temple,<sup>10</sup> next to the Sheep Gate (5:2).<sup>11</sup> The reference to this pool (κολυμβήθρα) hints, among other things, also at the Jewish purification rituals, while the mentioning of the Sheep Gate is a clear reminder of the sacrifices that take place at the Temple. Furthermore, the evangelist informs his readers that at the Bethesda pool, there is a multitude of sick people, the majority of which are obviously meant to be Jews (5:3).<sup>12</sup> One of them has been lame for thirty-eight years (5:5), which is precisely the period of Israel's wandering in the wilderness due to God's punishment for her unbelief (Num 14:26–35), according to Deut 2:14. The ap-

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*Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 337–46, esp. 344–45.

<sup>7</sup> See among others the relevant references in J. Warren Holleran, "Seeing the Light: A Narrative Reading of John 9," *ETL* 69 (1993): 354–82, esp. 360–64; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 139–40; Lee, *Narratives*, 105–07; Scholtissek, "Glaube," 97–101.

<sup>8</sup> Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium*, HNT 6, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 299–300, 303; Jean Zumstein, *Das Johannesevangelium*, KEK 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 216.

<sup>9</sup> On the overall symbolic potential of our narrative see Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 211.

<sup>10</sup> See 5:14. On the later archaeological evidence about the pool of Bethesda at the time of the New Testament see Shimon Gibson, "The Excavations at the Bethesda Pool in Jerusalem: Preliminary Report on a Project of Stratigraphic and Structural Analysis (1999–2009)," in *Sainte Anne de Jérusalem – La Piscine Probatique de Jésus à Saladin*, ed. Frans Bouwen and Claudine Dauphin, Proche-Orient Chrétien Numéro Spécial (Beyrouth: Faculté des Sciences Religieuses de l'Université Saint-Joseph, 2011), 22–29.

<sup>11</sup> I am here following the textual reconstruction of NA<sup>28</sup>, according to which the word πύλη is implied after the word προβατικῆ, while the word κολυμβήθρα is connected with the word Βηθζαθά or Βηθεσδά, the latter being the best-known and perhaps even the original version of the pool's name; see von Wahlde, *Gospel*, 217–18; Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, 295–96. For a further discussion of the topographical and the archaeological data see Joachim Jeremias, *The Rediscovery of Bethesda: John 5:2* (Louisville: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1966), 9–11.

<sup>12</sup> Koester, *Symbolism*, 53, offers us some historically well-founded arguments in favor of the existence of a mixed crowd consisting of Jews and Gentiles at the Bethesda pool; cf. also Keener, *Gospel*, 637–38. On this basis, an interpretation of the multitude in 5:3 as a representation of the κόσμος, would be fitting. Here, however, we will focus on the Jews present, whom the lame man represents, being himself Jewish.

parent accumulation of all these narrative details in the first verses of the story connects it with key themes and motifs of Israel's and the Jews' sacred history, faith, and religious practice.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly enough, the evangelist follows an analogous strategy in the story of the multiplication of the loaves. In its introductory verses, he creates a narrative framework reminiscent of Israel's exodus, as he refers to the following: the opposite shore of the Sea of Galilee (6:1), a reminder of the crossing of the Red Sea; the multitude that follows Jesus (6:2), reminding of the people of Israel following Moses in the wilderness; Jesus's signs (6:2), hinting at the signs of Moses (cf. 6:30–32);<sup>14</sup> Jesus's ascending onto a mountain (6:3), reminiscent of Moses's climbing onto Mount Sinai; finally, the proximity of the Jewish Passover (6:4), which of course, refers to Israel's exodus from Egypt. These details play a significant narrative, symbolic, and theological role in the background of the multiplication of the loaves, as well as in the ensuing discourse on the bread of life.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, then, the details of our narrative's introduction mentioned above should allow its readers to symbolically associate the story of the lame man with the people of Israel and their descendants, namely the Jewish people of his time, to which he himself belongs.

Based on the above observations, I will now move on to the interpretation of 5:1–18,<sup>16</sup> focusing on the analysis of the lame man's narrative development and symbolic function. In the following, I will make use of the categories of "implied author" and "implied readers," as I cannot be sure whether the evangelist and his historical audience indeed shared my suggested reading. I define my implied readers as Greek-speaking Jews or Jewish-Christians, who are knowledgeable of the Bible and can grasp the biblical references, the symbolic hints, and the theological ideas that are explicit or seem to be implied in our text. Additionally, they are open to the idea of the Fourth Gospel being a call to still wavering Jews to join

<sup>13</sup> Strangely enough, most exegetes fail to recognize the comprehensive symbolic value of all these narrative details, as well as their theological bearing in relation to the development of the story and its protagonist.

<sup>14</sup> The term σημεῖα is the Septuagint rendering of the Hebrew אֵימֹת used among other things also to describe God's signs through Moses. On the implied theological connection of the Johannine with the Mosaic signs see Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 1:352–54.

<sup>15</sup> Contrary to the aforementioned corresponding elements of the story of the lame man's healing, at least some of these introductory elements are recognized by the majority of exegetes; see representatively C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John. An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978), 273; Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 2:18; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, AB 29–29A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966–1977), 1:232; Theobald, *Evangelium*, 429–30; Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 244.

<sup>16</sup> In my analysis, I will exclude verses 5:3b and 4 as reflecting secondary glosses according to the witness of the relevant manuscript tradition; cf. Roger L. Omanson, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 174.

the community of Jesus-believers.<sup>17</sup> In the conclusions about the development and the symbolic value of the lame man's narrative character, I will also raise the question as to whether the narrative situation revealed through the interplay between implied author and implied readers could give us a plausible insight into the actual historical situation that dictated the narrative.

## 2. The Lame Man and the Johannine Jews

Our narrative begins with the sole Johannine reference to an unnamed Jewish festival (5:1). This fact indicates that the implied author does not seek to link the following story with a particular festival, as opposed, e. g., to the multiplication of the loaves (6:1–14), which he narratively and theologically relates to the Jewish Passover (6:4) and, thus, to exodus motifs. The vague reference of 5:1 could mean any Jewish feast, so, in a sense, every Jewish feast.<sup>18</sup> Our story, then, would appear as being archetypal in this regard.

The implied author explicitly speaks of a “festival of the Jews” (ἑορτὴ τῶν Ἰουδαίων), thus focusing exclusively on the Jewish community.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the story plays out in Jerusalem near the Temple-area, where many Jewish pilgrims from Palestine and the diaspora come together during Jewish festivals. The implied author mentions that a multitude (ὄχλος) of people (5:13), many of whom are sick (5:3), is present at the pool of Bethesda during the healing of one of them, namely the paralytic protagonist of our story. Consequently, Jesus performs this healing in the presence of many and various Jews (cf. 2:23),<sup>20</sup> whom the implied readers can view as being symbolically representative of the Jewish people as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

It is noteworthy that later in the Johannine narrative, Jesus reminds the Jewish multitude of this particular “work” (ἔργον) of his, presupposing that they are aware of it and pointing out that because of it, they are angry with him (7:20–23). Although the implied author does not clearly state whether the Jews of chapter 7 are eyewitnesses of the lame man's healing or have only heard about it, the use

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the similar methodology in Christos Karakolis, “The Unfinished Story of Nicodemus: A Reader-Centered Approach,” in *Expressions of the Johannine Kerygma in John 2:23–5:18: Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2017 in Jerusalem*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey, WUNT 423 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 13–27, esp. 13–14, 26–27. On the combination of reader-response analysis with narrative criticism see James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 30–33.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, SP 4 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998), 167–68; Felsch, *Feste*, 54–55.

<sup>19</sup> Schnackenburg, *Johannesevangelium*, 2:118; Haenchen, *Johannesevangelium*, 266; cf. also John 6:4; 7:2.

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 12.

<sup>21</sup> Schlatter, *Evangelium*, 91.

of the word ὄχλος in both chapters 5 and 7 allows the implied readers to assume that at least part of the second group belonged to the first one as well. When combined, these two references underscore the fact that the healing of the lame man concerns not just him personally but the Johannine Jews as a whole.

Furthermore, from the implied author's symbolic point of view, the large number of sick Jews near the pool of Bethesda (5:3) reveals the spiritual condition of the Jewish people, who have not yet believed in Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Being one of them, the lame man can practically be viewed as their representative, as is the case with Nicodemus representing the Jews of 2:23–25<sup>23</sup> or the royal official representing the Galileans of 4:44–45.<sup>24</sup>

Although the thirty-eight-year duration of the lame man's disease (5:5) could theoretically be devoid of any symbolic connotation,<sup>25</sup> the implied readers can undoubtedly spot a deeper meaning in it. As already mentioned, in the Old Testament this number refers to the years of Israel's wandering in the wilderness after their being punished by God for their unbelief (Deut 2:14).<sup>26</sup> From this point of view, the lame man is not just a symbolic representative of his contemporary Jews but also archetypically linked to their ancestors, thus connecting Israel's sacred story with the Jewish people's present. In this sense, the unbelief of the Israelites in the wilderness can be considered analogous to that of the Johannine Jews, a motif that is extensively used in 6:25–50.

Importantly, it is Jesus himself who chooses the lame man from within the crowd of the sick people (5:6a), thus taking the initiative to interact with him and eventually heal him. On his side, the lame man is unaware of Jesus's divine origin, identity, and power.<sup>27</sup> This lack of awareness also applies to the Johannine Jews, who in their narrative world still have the chance of being healed and

<sup>22</sup> Cf. John 9:31–41, in which accordingly, Jesus uses blindness as a symbol for the unbelief of the Pharisees.

<sup>23</sup> See among others Brown, *John*, 1:125–29, 137; R. Alan Culpepper, "Nicodemus: The Travail of New Birth," in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 249–59, esp. 253–54; Susan E. Hulen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 24–25.

<sup>24</sup> See the relevant discussion in D. Francois Tolmie, "The Characterisation of the Royal Official in the Fourth Gospel," in *Expressions of the Johannine Kerygma in John 2:23–5:18: Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2017 in Jerusalem*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Jörg Frey, WUNT 423 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 219–41, esp. 229–31.

<sup>25</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941), 180 n. 7; Bernard, *Commentary*, 229; Schneider, *Evangelium*, 127; Sanders-Mastin, *Commentary*, 160; Brown, *John*, 1:207.

<sup>26</sup> See Alfred Loisy, *Le quatrième Évangile* (Paris: Picard, 1903), 389–90; Strathmann, *Evangelium*, 101; Metzner, "Der Geheilte," 183–84; Straub, "Alles," 160; Thyen, *Johannesevangelium*, 297; Beutler, *Johannesevangelium*, 187; Theobald, *Evangelium*, 376–77; Felsch, *Feste*, 56–58; Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 213.

<sup>27</sup> Michaels, "Invalid," 339.

thus, saved from spiritual lameness, provided that they receive Jesus (cf. 1:11–12) and accept his gift of life.<sup>28</sup>

The phrase πολλὸν ἤδη χρόνον ἔχει (5:6b) accentuates the time length of the lame man's sickness. Differently from 5:5, the focus here does not seem to be on the exact duration of the lame man's disease but rather on the fact that after his long suffering, the time is ripe for a radical change in his life. Correspondingly, the implied readers are here informed that by analogy to the ending of Israel's wandering in the wilderness after a long period of spiritual lameness, the Jews now have the opportunity to be saved by Jesus Christ, who is fully aware of their long suffering.

Jesus's question to the lame man in 5:6c aims primarily at allowing him to express, on the one hand, his will to be healed and, on the other hand, his total inability to attain healing.<sup>29</sup> However, based on the key text in 9:39–41, one's will to be healed depends on awareness of her or his condition.<sup>30</sup> In this light, Jesus's question implies that the lame man could perhaps have accepted his situation as normal and inevitable, thus having lost all interest in seeking to be healed. Assuming that Jesus's question is indirectly also addressed to the Jewish people as a whole, it acquires a more profound meaning. After being estranged from God for so long, the Jews should want to return to him by believing in Jesus as their healer and savior. However, it could be that they do not realize their condition of spiritual lameness in the first place, in which case they will not be able to find healing.

The lame man's response (5:8) reveals that he indeed realizes the severity of his condition and, more importantly, that he has not accepted it as an inevitable reality. On the contrary, probably more than anything, he wants to be cured,<sup>31</sup> as he repeatedly and desperately tries to be the first one to enter the pool upon the stirring of the water, although his efforts fail every single time. Furthermore, he thinks that his problem could probably be solved if he had someone to assist him by putting him into the pool at just the right moment. It thus seems that the lame man has practically ceased to hope for God's intervention since he does not even mention him in the first place.<sup>32</sup> In other words, he puts his hope exclusively on

<sup>28</sup> See 3:15–16, 36; 4:14; 5:24, 29, 40; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47, 51, 53–54, 63, 68; 8:12; 10:10, 28; 11:25–26; 17:2–3; 20:31.

<sup>29</sup> C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 177; Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 5th ed., THKNT 4 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 140.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. especially 9:41b: νῦν δὲ λέγετε ὅτι βλέπομεν, ἢ ἁμαρτία ὑμῶν μένει, as well as 5:39–40: ἐραυνᾶτε τὰς γραφάς, ὅτι ὑμεῖς δοκεῖτε ἐν αὐταῖς ζωὴν αἰώνιον ἔχειν· καὶ ἐκεῖνα εἰσὶν αἱ μαρτυροῦσαι περὶ ἐμοῦ· καὶ οὐ θέλετε ἔλθειν πρὸς μεῖν ἵνα ζωὴν ἔχητε.

<sup>31</sup> Contra C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 320.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Koester, *Symbolism*, 90; Straub, "Alles," 160–61. Obviously, to the lame man's mind, the miraculous stirring of the water comes from God. However, he does not reckon that God would bother to help him personally by surpassing the miracle of the water. As a counterexample, in 11:22, Martha declares her faith in Jesus, according to which God will provide him with anything