

FAITH AND NARRATIVE A TWO-LEVEL READING OF BELIEF IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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Summary

The question of who truly believes according to John's Gospel can be unclear, complicated by characters who display contradictory evidence, both portrayed positively yet also reflecting imperfections. A solution to the confusion lies in attending to the overt narration of the Gospel, which creates a distinction between events within the story and the presentation to the reader. Positive expressions of faith within the story can be identified as 'acceptable belief', involving commitment to Jesus but with a limited understanding of his identity and mission. Only after the cross is 'genuine belief', (which includes greater understanding), possible.

1. The Problem

Belief is a key theme running through the Gospel of John. It appears in the prologue (1:12-13), signalling its significance in the following narrative; the Gospel also has the stated aim that the reader might believe (20:31). The characters within the Gospel narrative contribute to the purpose of evoking and encouraging belief as they display and model belief or its alternative of unbelief, conveying in narrative form the intended response to Jesus. Yet at the same time there is a lack of agreement around the quality of belief displayed by certain characters within the Gospel. For some characters, their story is insufficiently detailed to make any confident assertions regarding their faith. For others, such as Nicodemus, there is an ambiguity which may function

to provoke the audience to question the nature of belief.¹ Yet it is not only the portrayal of marginal characters which suffers from a lack of consensus. The disciples are often seen as examples of genuine belief, yet some scholars reject their faith as inadequate.² Others are less harsh in their ultimate assessment, but still focus on the failings of the disciples as evidence of inadequate faith.³ In contrast to Nicodemus, it does not appear to be the role of the disciples to be ambiguous. Indeed, their function within the narrative is more often understood to be modelling belief and discipleship. Given the centrality of belief within the Gospel, the uncertainty around who believes and what genuine belief actually entails presents a problem which needs resolution.

To resolve the divergent assessments of characters and their believing status, we must consider why such divergent assessments arise. The Gospel seeks to evoke the sort of belief that leads to life (20:31), belief that can be labelled ‘genuine’.⁴ It is commonly accepted that the Gospel of John portrays a range of responses to Jesus, some of which are presented as sufficient to lead to life, and others which are not.⁵ Despite the Gospel’s apparently binary framework, in which people fall into categories of either belief or unbelief (3:18-21), many characters display both positive elements along with imperfections. The disciples are a prime example, as they follow Jesus, and the Twelve at

¹ On Nicodemus as intentionally ambiguous with regard to his believing status, see G. Renz, ‘Nicodemus: An Ambiguous Disciple? A Narrative Sensitive Investigation’ in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. J. Lierman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006): 255-83; J. M. Bassler, ‘Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel’, *JBL* 108/4 (1989): 635-46.

² Those who understand the disciples’ faith as genuine include C. Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); N. Farely, *The Disciples in the Fourth Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). Those who reject it include S. E. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); D. R. Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1997): 133.

³ Thus Moloney stresses the way that titles ascribed to Jesus by the disciples in John 1 reflect an inadequate understanding of Jesus’ identity. F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998): 54-56.

⁴ The label ‘genuine belief’ is not a Johannine one, but it can be a useful tool in order to refer to the form of belief that the Gospel seeks to evoke.

⁵ R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987): 146-48; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB 29; 2 vols; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-1970): 1, 530-31; F. J. Moloney, ‘From Cana to Cana (John 2.1-4.54) and the Fourth Evangelist’s Concept of Correct (and Incorrect) Faith’ in *Studia Biblica 1978 International Congress on Biblical Studies*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1978): 193-95.

least stick with Jesus when others abandon him (6:60-69).⁶ They are said to believe in Jesus (2:11) and accept his teaching (6:68-69). Jesus himself gives important evidence for the faith of the disciples, as he accepts them and includes them in his mission (4:35-38; 17:20). He affirms their faith and declares that they are clean (13:10; 15:3). At the same time, there is evidence for a negative assessment of the belief of the disciples. The disciples ask questions that display a lack of understanding of both Jesus' identity and his mission (14:5,8). Their confessions only relate a part of Jesus' identity, as a teacher, or even as the Christ (1:41,45,49), but without apprehending his deity.⁷ The problem for assessing the quality of faith of the disciples comes in resolving the evidence for their faith with the evidence of their failings.

The divergent assessments of the faith of the disciples arise primarily through a prioritisation of one side of the evidence or the other. Where one scholar sees genuine but imperfect belief, another will see flawed faith which cannot be called genuine belief unless the flaws are overcome. Significantly, the negative evidence is predominantly about understanding, and thus if faith is conceived solely or primarily in propositional terms, a negative assessment is likely. An example of this approach is seen in the work of Christopher Skinner, who assesses all responses against the presentation of Jesus in the prologue.⁸ The prologue is understood as giving the content

⁶ The response to Jesus which is summarised as 'believing' (20:31) includes, but cannot be limited to, propositional belief, and must also include discipleship. Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 17; S. Motyer, *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and 'the Jews'* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997): 60; J. L. Staley, *The Print's First Kiss: A Rhetorical Investigation of the Implied Reader in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988): 74. The disciples in John refers primarily, although not exclusively, to the Twelve. However, 6:60-71 differentiates the two in order to prompt the reader to question the nature of genuine discipleship. C. Seglenieks, 'Untrustworthy Believers: The Rhetorical Strategy of the Johannine Language of Commitment and Belief', *NovT* 61/1 (2019): 55-69, esp. 60-61.

⁷ While the summary of genuine belief (20:31) does not explicitly present Jesus as divine, its proximity to the paradigmatic confession of 20:28, along with the depiction of Jesus as divine in 1:1, indicates that the belief that the Gospel seeks to evoke in the reader includes belief in Jesus' divine identity. W. R. G. Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel: Structure and Issues in Johannine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017): 117-19; J. Zumstein, *L'évangile selon Saint Jean (1321)* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007): 297.

⁸ C. W. Skinner, 'Misunderstanding, Christology, and Johannine Characterization: Reading John's Characters through the Lens of the Prologue' in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. C. W. Skinner (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013); C. W. Skinner, *John and Thomas – Gospels in Conflict? Johannine Characterization and the Thomas Question* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009): 37-39. See

required for genuine belief, setting out Jesus' identity as God incarnate. The nature of this approach focuses upon the confessions that characters make, as the primary evidence for the content of belief. By this standard, the disciples in John 1 fall short of genuine belief, as their confessions reflect a messianic understanding of Jesus without apprehending his divinity. Of course, such an approach leads to a predominantly negative assessment of most characters, especially in the early parts of the Gospel, as only Thomas confesses Jesus as God. Judith Redman takes a similar approach, taking 20:31 as the standard of belief, and thus arguing that only Martha in 11:27 displays genuine belief.⁹ Such a pessimistic assessment is problematic, for if the Gospel seeks to evoke genuine belief, it would be at odds with that aim for there to be only one example of genuine belief to be emulated.¹⁰ While the measuring of characters' belief against the prologue has the advantage of a clear standard for what is and is not genuine belief, to achieve this clarity requires the marginalisation of other aspects of characters' responses to Jesus, limiting faith to confessed propositional belief.

An alternative approach that gives more weight to other dimensions beyond the confessions comes from Cor Bennema.¹¹ He sets out the standard of 'saving belief' according to the Gospel as 'ongoing belief that issues in discipleship', which then leads to assessing the disciples as 'slow but sticky'.¹² On the one hand they are described as fluctuating between understanding, misunderstanding, and failure to understand, yet as they remain with Jesus they are judged positively

also W. Bonney, *Caused to Believe: The Doubting Thomas Story at the Climax of John's Christological Narrative* (Leiden: Brill, 2002): 87-93.

⁹ J. C. S. Redman, 'Eyewitness Testimony and the Characters in the Fourth Gospel' in Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization*, 66. Contra F. J. Moloney, 'Can Everyone Be Wrong? A Reading of John 11:1-12:8', *NTS* 49/4 (2003): 505-27.

¹⁰ Redman is not alone in such a harsh assessment of the characters in the Gospel. Hylen uses the prologue as a standard, but only explicit confessions are accepted as evidence of belief, and the disciples' misunderstanding throughout the Gospel is equated with unbelief to the extent that she does not see them attaining genuine belief within the narrative. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers*, 5, 55, 59-74; S. E. Hylen, 'The Disciples: The "Now" and "Not Yet" of Belief in Jesus' in *Character and Characterization in John*, ed. S. A. Hunt et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013): 226. See also Beck, *The Discipleship Paradigm*; Beck forms a negative assessment of all named characters within the Gospel. However, such negative views have not found wide acceptance.

¹¹ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*.

¹² Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 17, 117-26.

overall.¹³ While this is a more balanced approach, it loses something in precision with regard to the propositional dimension of belief. Misunderstanding is interpreted in light of the other actions of a character, and so if the character continues in discipleship the misunderstanding must not be too serious. Thus, for Bennema, the positive evidence for discipleship is allowed to outweigh the evidence of incomplete propositional belief.¹⁴ The examples of Skinner and Bennema illustrate the fact that a verdict passed on the faith of the disciples depends largely on whether the reader places more weight on the positive evidence of belief or on the negative evidence of misunderstanding.

One assumption that is evident across many approaches is that the standard for genuine belief is constant across the Gospel, both for the characters within the Gospel and for the reader. This is striking in light of the common assertion that none truly understand Jesus or his mission prior to the cross.¹⁵ If that is the case, then to judge all by a post-resurrection standard means arguing by implication that Jesus required more than was possible from people during his ministry. Alternatively, there is the view that the Gospel characters are constructs created by the author to model faith for a later audience. However, there is another possibility: the author of the Gospel may have been aware of the limitations of belief during Jesus' ministry, and may have preserved both that limitation, and Jesus' acceptance of such human limitation, within his narrative.

2. Towards a Solution

To move towards a solution requires a better understanding of how the Johannine narrative works, drawing on narrative theory, in particular

¹³ Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 122.

¹⁴ The two-level reading that has been flagged as the solution is perhaps implicit within Bennema's work. Moloney suggests that there are two levels in a review of *Encountering Jesus*: Bennema sees the Gospel as including both historical events and a literary presentation of those events. F. J. Moloney, 'Review of *Encountering Jesus*', *RBL* 3/11 (2011).

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, 'Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel', *TynBul* 33 (1982): 59-91, esp. 76; M. R. Hillmer, 'They Believed in Him: Discipleship in the Johannine Tradition' in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. R. N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 77-97, esp. 85; J. Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature and Theology of the Johannine Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991): 332; Farely, *The Disciples*, 63.

the distinction between the story level of a text and the discourse level. The story level is the action within the story, the world which is represented within the text, while the discourse level refers to communication between the author and the audience, or at least the implied author and implied reader, as we cannot access the real author or the original audience except in so far as they are revealed in the text. This distinction between story and discourse is based on the work of Seymour Chatman, who explains that the 'story' of a text is the content, the events, and characters within the narrative. The 'discourse' is how that content is communicated, including the way an author controls which elements are included and how they are presented to the reader.¹⁶ Importantly, there can be a temporal distinction between the story and the discourse, each having a distinct 'now' – the 'now' of the characters within the story as the narrated events take place, and the 'now' of the communicative event between the implied reader and the implied author.¹⁷ For those texts which have such a distinction, it is the narrator who creates a divide between the two. As the Gospel is shaped by its author, deciding what is included in the narrative and how it is presented (cf. 21:25), we may find a similar distinction operating within the Gospel narrative. Despite the use of various narrative approaches to aid our understanding of the Gospel, the application of the story-discourse distinction has been minimal, and it has not been used to understand the characters within John's narrative.¹⁸ Thus the

¹⁶ S. B. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978): 19, 43. Bennema uses a form of this distinction (although not in these terms), separating the narration of characters and John's evaluation of them; however, he does not distinguish between an evaluation of the characters within the story and prior to the cross and the evaluation of faith from the post-resurrection perspective at the discourse level. Thus some of the disciples are evaluated as reflecting both adequate and inadequate faith responses. Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 204-205.

¹⁷ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 63.

¹⁸ Even some introductions to narrative criticism of the New Testament overlook this distinction. For example, on temporal perspective, James Resseguie only discusses the now and future distinction that the New Testament authors reflect, and not the distinction between the 'now' of the author and the 'now' of the story. J. L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005): 186-87. Culpepper, while not using the terminology of story and discourse, observes the retrospective point of view of the Gospel, as the narrator looks back to events that took place at an earlier time, yet this point of view is not connected to the understanding of the characters within the narrative. Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 28. Tolmie works with the narrative at two levels, but he distinguishes the story and the text, to different ends. D. F. Tolmie, *Jesus' Farewell to the Disciples: John 13:1-17:26 in Narratological Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

application of the story-discourse distinction has the potential to offer new insights to our understanding of the Johannine characters.

3. Story and Discourse in John

Before applying the story-discourse distinction, the validity of using this theory on the Gospel of John must be established. As Chatman states, it is overt narration that creates a distinction between the story level ‘now’ and that of the discourse. The Gospel of John is the most overtly narrated of the Gospels, as the narrator steps in to address the reader directly. This overt narration is often from an explicitly post-resurrection perspective, and, as will be demonstrated in the following section, it separates the ‘now’ of the story, the time of Jesus’ ministry, from the ‘now’ of the post-resurrection church. Thus, the text of the Gospel explicitly signals the distinction between the two levels, and in what follows I will trace out that distinction and the implications for understanding the faith of the characters within the narrative.

The first evidence for the two levels in the text of John comes in 2:22, ‘So when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the statement Jesus had made.’¹⁹ This narration follows Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, where Jesus has equated himself with the temple. The Jews clearly misunderstand Jesus (2:18), and by implication the disciples do too. The narrator points forward to a time when the disciples both remember Jesus’ words and comprehend them. Their response is believing rather than understanding, but in order to believe the words Jesus spoke there is an implicit requirement to also understand the words. The point of understanding comes after the resurrection. The narrator distinguishes between what the disciples understood at the time when Jesus spoke and what they understood in a post-resurrection context. At the story level, the disciples fall short of understanding Jesus, but at the discourse level the disciples and the reader can understand and believe. Early in the narrative, the narrator’s comments establish for the reader the framework of the two levels of the narrative.

Considering in more detail what the disciples’ greater understanding includes, it encompasses both Jesus’ statement, referring back to 2:21, and Scripture (*τὴ γραφή*, 2:22). The reference to Scripture connects to

¹⁹ Scripture quotations taken from the CSB.

the earlier remembering in 2:17. When Jesus clears the temple, the disciples remember the scriptural text of Psalm 69:9. The use of ‘remember’ in 2:17 on a first reading continues a sequence of aorist verbs that convey the main line of the narrative. The implication is that the disciples recalled this verse as they saw Jesus acting in the temple. Psalm 69 reflects a figure who is persecuted on account of upholding God and his temple, and the disciples may have connected this to Jesus on the basis of his prophetic act in the temple. The use of the identical form of ‘remember’ only a few lines later creates a link between the two instances of remembering. This connection is strengthened by the reference to ‘the Scripture’, as 2:17 contains the only scriptural quotation in the pericope.²⁰ The connection between the two instances of remembering suggests that while the disciples made an initial connection between Jesus and Psalm 69, in a post-resurrection context they understood a greater significance to the text. In this later context, the suffering described in the psalm was linked to Jesus’ death, as seen by the quotation of Psalm 69:21 in John 19:29. In the context of the Gospel, Jesus’ use of Psalm 69 in 2:17 becomes an allusion to his death, similar to his statement in 2:21. The initial connection between Psalm 69 and Jesus was made during his ministry, but the full implications of this Scripture are only understood after the resurrection.

The narrator reminds the reader of the two-level perspective towards the close of Jesus’ public ministry in 12:16. There the narrator states ‘His disciples did not understand these things at first. However, when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.’ As with the first example, the narrator points to a later remembering by the disciples. Here the initial lack of understanding is made explicit, while the later understanding of the disciples is implicit, but clearly intended by the contrast between the subsequent situation and what came before. The point of understanding is when Jesus was glorified. In the context

²⁰ The singular form of $\tauῇ γραφῇ$ usually refers to a specific Scripture, and the link to the quotation in 2:17 is made by Beasley-Murray and by Michaels. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2nd ed.; WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1987): 41; J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010): 170. Carson and Barrett argue a more general reference to the Old Testament, with Barrett struggling to see how $\chiατεσθίω$ could refer to Jesus’ death. However, this overlooks the use of Psalm 69 by John in connection with his death in 19:29. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991): 183; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978): 201.

of the Gospel, Jesus' glorification is to be understood as either his resurrection or his ascension, and while the precise referent is debated, the events around the cross are clearly in view. At the story level, the disciples fail to understand the Scriptures and events associated with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, but at the discourse level both the disciples and the reader can understand.

On this occasion the later understanding encompasses both what was written about Jesus and what was done to him (12:16). The reference to what was written is to the quotation from Zechariah 9:9 in John 12:15, not the preceding scriptural quotation in 12:13. Firstly, as the crowd explicitly connects 12:13 to Jesus, it is unlikely that the disciples would fail to make that connection.²¹ Secondly, 12:13 is easily understood in a general messianic sense, as Jesus has already been acclaimed as 'the coming one' (6:14; 11:27) and king of Israel (1:49). Instead, the combination of word and action indicates that what the disciples come to understand is the bringing of the young donkey and the significance of that action as conveyed in the words of Zechariah. The reader is to understand that neither those who brought the donkey, nor the disciples, saw the symbolic significance at the time. Nor were the words of Zechariah linked to Jesus at this point, either by the disciples or the crowds. Only later did the disciples come to understand both the act and the scriptural connection and implications.²² As with the first example in 2:22, the later understanding of the disciples is not merely a greater understanding of Jesus, but more specifically a greater understanding of Scripture and how it points to Jesus.

A third narratorial distinction between stages of understanding comes in 20:9. On reaching the empty tomb, the disciple with Peter believes, yet this belief is placed alongside the subsequent statement from the narrator 'For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.' This verse is difficult to interpret as it is unclear if the lack of understanding has been overcome at this point in the narrative. The conjunction *γάρ* indicates that verse 9 is explanatory

²¹ Carson, *John*, 434. Barrett sees a contradiction as the crowds apparently recognise the messianic significance of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, but the disciples do not. Yet this fails to distinguish between the crowd's acclamation and Jesus' subsequent action. Barrett, *John*, 419.

²² The idea of people doing something of greater significance than they realised is a repeated occurrence in John, as with Caiaphas' unknowing prophecy (11:49-52) or the response of the soldiers who come to arrest Jesus (18:6).

to verse 8, telling the reader why the other disciple can be said to believe now, because prior to this point he had not understood the Scriptures.²³ Because *πιστεύω* (believe) in verse 8 is used absolutely, it is not clear what exactly the other disciple believes here – whether he believes in the resurrection or merely the report of Mary in verse 2. However, resolving this matter is not crucial for the present argument, for however one understands the faith of the other disciple in 20:8, the narrator makes clear that there are two different periods with regard to his faith. At the story level, at least prior to this point, the other disciple was characterised by deficient understanding, in this case a failure to understand the Scriptures which said that Jesus must rise from the dead. ‘Not yet’ implies a subsequent period characterised by the overcoming of that deficient understanding, whether that takes place here in the wake of the resurrection, or subsequently with Jesus’ appearance.²⁴

As with the preceding instances, a later understanding of the Scriptures is in view, as are their implications with regard to Jesus. Unlike the previous examples, the Scripture in question is not quoted. The use of *γραφή* is again singular, which suggests that reference to a specific Scripture is intended. Regardless of the precise referent, the disciples later come to understand that the Scripture points to the necessity of Jesus’ resurrection. The reference to Scripture reinforces the pattern seen in both 2:22 and 12:16. In each of these three instances, the basis for understanding Jesus, his words, and his deeds is a deeper understanding of the Scriptures.

The distinction between story and discourse levels is reinforced by one further narratorial aside. In 7:39, the narrator explains Jesus’ words in 7:37-38 by stating ‘for the Spirit had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been glorified’. The narrator takes care to ensure the reader does not confuse the two levels of the narrative. While the gift of the Spirit is a present reality for the reader, as for the author, the Spirit had not yet been given when Jesus spoke these words in the temple. As with 12:16, it is Jesus’ glorification which marks the divide between the story world and the discourse world. While the focus here is on the gift of the Spirit, a link to the question of understanding can

²³ S. E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2010): 52-53.

²⁴ If this subsequent understanding is understood to be found in the narrative present in 20:8, then we see the story and discourse levels beginning to come together.

be made based upon the role of the Spirit in later understanding (cf. 16:12-13; see below). The distinction between the two levels is consistently maintained by the author, with the resurrection and glorification of Jesus as the key divide between the two.²⁵

The temporal distinctions in understanding Jesus which we have seen in the two levels of the narrative are reflected in the words of Jesus during his public ministry. Jesus promises greater revelation in 1:50-51, a revelation that will lead to greater understanding. When read in light of other promises connected to the Son of Man, which focus on exaltation and ascension (3:12-14; 6:62), along with the order of the image where the angels first ascend to the Son of Man, this is a promise of seeing the glorified Son of Man.²⁶ However, Loader seeks to dissociate the image from the motif of revelation, in part due to seeing Nathanael's confession as 'substantially the same as that which the Gospel as a whole seeks to elicit'.²⁷ Yet Nathanael has just made a confession based upon a revelation of Jesus' knowledge (1:48-49; cf. 4:16-19), and Jesus' promise comes in response to that confession. The implication is that a greater understanding of Jesus will come with a greater revelation of Jesus.²⁸ Given that the language of exaltation and glorification is tied to the cross, this revelation is to be found there – when the partial understanding displayed at the story level will be surpassed in the post-resurrection era.²⁹ The promise of greater understanding resulting from the cross event is repeated in 8:28 as Jesus says 'When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he.' Again, there is a clear divide between the way that Jesus can be

²⁵ Carson observes one other way in which the narrator reflects a distinction between the time of Jesus and later understanding, as it is the narrator who in 12:33 explains Jesus' words in 12:31-32 instead of placing an anachronistic explanation on Jesus' lips. Carson, 'Understanding Misunderstandings', 81. While Carson observes that John distinguishes between the two time periods, he does not ground that discussion in the theoretical approaches to how narratives work, nor does he explore the complexities of faith prior to the cross, indicating only that it falls short.

²⁶ Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel*, 254-58. Loader rightly notes the need to account for the selective way John has used the image from Genesis. For a more general revelatory view, see Brown, *John*, 1, 88-91.

²⁷ Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel*, 254.

²⁸ J. van der Watt, 'Angels in John 1:51' in *The Opening of John's Narrative (John 1:19-2:22)*, ed. R. A. Culpepper et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017): 133-63, esp. 163.

²⁹ While some see Jesus' promise as including the revelation entailed in his ministry, culminating in the cross, the image in 1:50-51 is of Jesus exalted, not merely Jesus incarnate. Carson, *John*, 165; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 28.

understood before and after the cross.³⁰ At the story level, such understanding is not yet possible, but at the discourse level it is a reality and it is this reality that highlights the reprehensibility of the response of the crowd as they reject what to the reader is obvious.

The distinction between the story level and the discourse level continues in Jesus' words through the Farewell Discourse. During the footwashing incident, Jesus tells Peter 'What I'm doing you don't realize now, but afterward you will understand' (13:7). Peter has failed to understand not the literal act which Jesus is performing, but the symbolic significance of it. A clear temporal distinction is made between the lack of understanding in the 'now' of the story level and the understanding that will come after. The context of 'the hour' (13:1) along with the symbolic foreshadowing of the cross in the footwashing indicates that Peter's understanding will come after the cross event (cf. 14:20). A final distinction between limited understanding in the 'now' of the story level and subsequent greater understanding comes in the promise that the Spirit will lead the disciples into all truth (16:12-13). The promise emphasises the continuity of the message of the Spirit with the message of Jesus, which coheres with the alignment between Jesus and Old Testament Scripture, which is a feature of the disciples' later understanding. Even at the high point of their pre-resurrection understanding (16:29-30), the disciples continue to experience limitations in what they grasp.³¹ The coming of the Spirit, which is linked to Jesus' glorification (7:39), enables the move from the story-level limited understanding to the complete understanding of the discourse level.

4. Two Levels of Belief

The way that the Gospel clearly expresses the distinction between the story and discourse levels, particularly with regard to the understanding of the disciples, leads to the argument that any assessment of the believing status of characters within the narrative must take this distinction into account. While the Gospel is written from a later

³⁰ Loader, *Jesus in John's Gospel*, 84-85.

³¹ For the argument that 16:29-30 reflects a high point in the disciples' understanding, see C. Seglenieks, "Now You Believe": The Faith of the Disciples in John 16:30-33', *Colloquium* 50/2 (2018): 90-108.

perspective, there is a clear intent to represent events and characters as they were, not as they ought to be from that later perspective. What this means is that there are in fact two standards of belief within the Gospel.

The first of these is the standard of belief at the story level. The depictions of faith responses at the story level on occasion include responses that seem to be adequate. The disciples in 2:11 are said to believe, with no suggestion that there is anything lacking in that belief. This can be contrasted with other occasions where belief is stated, yet questions are raised about the adequacy of such belief (2:23-25). Indeed, the feature of contrasting responses serves particularly to suggest some characters have responded sufficiently to Jesus. In John 6, the Twelve keep following Jesus, in contrast to the other disciples who turn away. Similarly, while the man healed in John 5 is not explicitly condemned as unbelieving, the far more positive response of the blind man in chapter 9 suggests that he displays an adequate response to Jesus. Those who are presented in this positive light display such characteristics as following, abiding, or continuing with Jesus, along with an attitude of acceptance towards Jesus' teachings. Yet alongside these positive aspects there is often a lack of knowledge. With the disciples, we have observed that the lack of knowledge is often presented in the context of making the story-discourse distinction evident. But a lack of knowledge can be seen in the Samaritan woman who only incrementally grasps Jesus identity (4:9,19,29,42), or the blind man who does not know who the Son of Man is (9:35-36). These characters are often interpreted as among the most positive examples in the Gospel, yet they never confess Jesus in the terms of the prologue, or 20:28-31.³² Thus there are a number of characters who are presented in ways that imply a sufficient response to Jesus, yet have the flaw that their knowledge is limited.

A key feature in discerning the status of these characters is Jesus' response to them. Some characters are accepted by Jesus, either

³² The confession of the Samaritan villagers that Jesus is 'the saviour of the world' (4:42) has significant imperial connections, and while Isaianic connections may give the title a messianic flavour (Isa. 49:1-6), it does not appear to have connotations of divinity. Meanwhile, the response of the blind man is hard to categorise. Several commentators argue *προσκυνέω* is more likely to indicate a physical act of prostration rather than worship: see Beasley-Murray, *John*, 159-60; Carson, *John*, 377. Additionally, Riley has questioned the inclusion of 9:38 on text-critical grounds. P. C. J. Riley, *The Lord of the Gospel of John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019): 114-22. Thus, it is difficult to conclude that the blind man sees Jesus as divine.

explicitly or implicitly. The explicit acceptance comes for the disciples in Jesus' declaration that they (apart from Judas) are clean (13:10; 15:3) and that Jesus has chosen them (15:16; cf. 17:6-12). Implicit acceptance is shown through the inclusion of the disciples in Jesus' mission (4:38), and for the Samaritans through Jesus' abiding with them, in contrast to his departure from groups that oppose him (4:40; cf. 8:59; 10:39). Jesus abiding with the Samaritans is notable given the theological significance of abiding developed in 15:1-10. Jesus' acceptance is in contrast to occasions when others are told that they do not believe (5:38; 10:25), or that their guilt remains (9:41), clearly indicating that those characters are not accepted by Jesus. Jesus' response to misunderstanding also varies. For some characters, misunderstanding is met with correction, which can at times be harsh (14:9) but has the aim of greater understanding. The misunderstanding of others is met with dire warnings, including that they may die in their sins (8:21,24). That sort of warning, with the implication that those warned are not yet accepted by Jesus, is never directed towards the disciples. Jesus corrects some while rebuking others; he accepts some yet does not accept others.

The centrality of Jesus' acceptance as an assessing criterion leads to the label of 'acceptable belief' which can be applied to the standard of belief at the story level. Acceptable belief entails commitment to Jesus, along with the characteristics for which Jesus calls, including obedience, love, abiding, and following. At the story level, this belief is adequate, but there is room to develop in understanding. The disciples consistently fail to grasp Jesus' mission, whether that be the prediction of his death and resurrection in 2:19, the implications of his entry into Jerusalem (12:12-15), or his return to the Father (16:17). Crucially, however, the disciples have sufficient understanding to enable ongoing discipleship (6:60-69). Those passages which highlight the distinction between the story level and the discourse level also identify the cross as the moment that divides between the world of the story and the world of the discourse in which the reader shares. The cross is the defining moment of belief, in the sense that it makes genuine belief possible. The author of the Gospel, rather than pushing a post-resurrection understanding of Jesus before the cross, makes clear to the reader that Jesus accepted the belief of those who were yet to fully grasp his identity and mission. Thus 'acceptable belief' is: a) accepted by Jesus;

b) has room to grow in understanding; and c) lies before the death and resurrection of Jesus.

At the discourse level ‘genuine belief’ is presented somewhat differently. This is the belief that the Gospel seeks to evoke in the reader, encapsulated in 20:31: ‘believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God’. This is to be understood in its context as no lower confession than that which immediately precedes it, when Thomas calls Jesus ‘My Lord and My God’ (20:28). In the context of both the aim of the Gospel and its narrative shape, the confession of Thomas serves not to highlight his doubts, but to model true understanding of Jesus. At last Jesus is confessed in the terms of the prologue, arriving at the full understanding of Jesus which the Gospel presents and displaying the belief which the reader is to emulate.³³ This full understanding of Jesus includes an understanding of the way the Old Testament foreshadows and reveals Jesus’ identity and actions. This genuine belief entails the same commitment of obedience, love, abiding, and following that was seen at the story level, but with the heightened level of understanding now possible after the cross.

Following the resurrection of Jesus, the two levels of belief, those at the story level and the discourse level, coalesce. In the confession of Thomas most climactically, a character expresses within the story the depth of belief that the narrator seeks to evoke in the reader.³⁴ The acceptable belief of the story level has developed into the genuine belief of the discourse level. From this point, what was previously acceptable belief is no longer enough. The acceptable belief of the story level was a feature of Jesus’ ministry alone, for with the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit the understanding which was beyond anyone prior to the cross is now possible. Throughout the

³³ Witherington states the standard of belief is comprised in the prologue along with 20:28,31; however, he does not distinguish between the function of these statements for the characters in the narrative as distinct from their function for the reader. B. Witherington III, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995): 31.

³⁴ While the significance for the audience of the Gospel includes endorsing faith through testimony rather than sight, the central importance of 20:25-29 is that Thomas confesses Jesus as divine. The reader has known Jesus is God from the beginning of the narrative (1:1), and now at last a character within the narrative arrives at this belief. How Thomas arrives at such faith is secondary, and 20:29 does not need to be understood as a criticism of his faith, for he has believed what John intends his readers to believe. Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 167-68; Farelly, *Disciples*, 126; Brown, *John*, 1, 6; Zumstein, *L’évangile selon Saint Jean*, 291.

Gospel is the indication that belief must develop further – Jesus continues to teach and correct in order to bring his followers to the goal of genuine belief. The cross is the goal and culmination of his ministry (19:30), after which people are able to respond to Jesus in the full sense which the Gospel presents as essential. The reader is to follow the trajectory of the characters within the story to arrive at this goal.

5. Conclusions

The end result of understanding belief at the level of story and discourse is that we can now understand with clarity the quality of faith displayed by the disciples throughout the Gospel narrative. The disciples, from their first scene in 1:35-51 through until chapter 20, display acceptable belief. From the beginning, Jesus invites them to stay with him (1:39), and throughout they are accepted and affirmed by Jesus. Alongside this they demonstrate a lack of understanding, yet that never separates them from Jesus in the way it does some other characters (cf. 6:60-69). Their failure to fully grasp Jesus' identity or mission does not stop Jesus treating them as believers, and thus they can be accounted as examples of 'acceptable belief'. Yet we can also be clear that prior to chapter 20 the disciples do not live up to the standard of belief that is conveyed either in the prologue or in the confession of Thomas and the subsequent purpose statement (20:28-31).³⁵ Only after the cross can they attain to the level of understanding that genuine belief requires, and it is this level of understanding that the audience of the Gospel is called upon to display. The prologue does not set the reader up to look down on the early expressions of faith, but to point them to a greater faith that is to come. Prior to chapter 20, the disciples are models for the reader to imitate in all but their understanding, as the Gospel seeks to encourage the reader to obey, love, abide, and follow just as the disciples do throughout the narrative. However, the reader is called to go beyond this and understand Jesus in the way that the prologue and 20:28-31 indicate.

A recognition of the two levels at which the Gospel of John operates is not limited to clarifying our understanding of the believing status of

³⁵ Riley argues that the use of *κύριος* (Lord) in John reflects a similar pattern, pointing to Jesus' divinity but not used in that way by the characters before the resurrection. Riley, *The Lord of the Gospel of John*, 189-90.

the characters within the Gospel narrative. It also contributes more generally to our understanding of how John works. The two levels at which John operates are evident from clear indications in the text and strongly suggest that the Gospel is to be read with an awareness of these two levels. If the Gospel is constructed to use this distinction in the way it conveys the intended response of belief, then it is worth asking what other implications an awareness of the two levels has for our understanding of John. There are two further implications to explore here, both of which concern how we understand the relationship between John and history.

The first of these concerns the other two-level reading that has been widely applied to the Gospel. J. L. Martyn's two-level hypothesis is that the Gospel presents a combination of the events at the time of Jesus with the situation of the community to which the Gospel was written.³⁶ While his model is not as popular as it once was, it is still widely used and at times assumed.³⁷ Yet in light of the present proposal, Martyn's hypothesis has one significant deficiency. With Martyn's proposal, there are no clear markers that point to where the division between the two layers may lie. The two are intertwined, and the decision of which portions to assign to which level rests solely in the hands of the interpreter.³⁸ As a result, a systematic application of Martyn's proposal to the Gospel easily breaks down.³⁹ This leaves Martyn's model as no more than a creative imposition upon the text rather than something that emerges from careful attention to the text.⁴⁰ The author of this Gospel is careful to distinguish what happened at the

³⁶ J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

³⁷ For a survey of the use and development of the community hypothesis, including critiques, see D. A. Lamb, *Text, Context and the Johannine Community: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Johannine Writings* (New York/London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015): 2-28.

³⁸ As Klink argues, there is nothing in the text to suggest that an early reader of the Gospel would know to read 9:22 as evidence that there were two levels to the narrative. E. W. Klink, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (SNTS 141; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 133-34.

³⁹ As demonstrated by A. Reinhartz, 'The Johannine Community and its Jewish Neighbors: A Reappraisal' in *What Is John? Vol II: Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. F. Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998): 111-38. Further critiques of the community hypothesis are made by T. Hägerland, 'John's Gospel: A Two-Level Drama?', *JSNT* 25/3 (2003): 309-22.

⁴⁰ The danger of eisegesis in reading a community out of a text is observed by S. Motyer, 'Method in Fourth Gospel Studies: A Way Out of the Impasse?', *JSNT* 66/1 (1997): 27-44.

time of Jesus and what happened later, and the reader's attention is drawn to that distinction. Such care renders the idea of an unmarked intermingling of two levels as argued by Martyn to be implausible at best.

The second implication is that if the author of this Gospel has taken such demonstrable care to distinguish between the story level and the discourse level, then it adds credibility to the Gospel as a historical source. The Gospel of John has often been sidelined in discussions of the historical Jesus, although the recent *John, Jesus and History* project has sought to redress this imbalance.⁴¹ The Gospel has often been taken as more theological than historical, or, as with Martyn, more concerned with a hypothetical community and their situation than with relating accurate details of Jesus' ministry. Yet the care taken to acknowledge that the way things were while Jesus conducted his ministry was different from the setting of the later church instead suggests that the author had a concern to accurately relate Jesus' ministry as it happened. There is an intentional separation between the events of Jesus' ministry and the literary framework of the discourse level.

The Gospel of John is a finely crafted literary work, and the present study shows one more dimension to the way in which John functions. The levels of story and discourse are distinguished through the commentary of the narrator. A recognition of this distinction has the effect that we can identify two forms of ideal response presented within the text. At the story level, there is acceptable belief, where characters may follow Jesus yet are limited in their understanding. At the discourse level, the reader is presented with genuine belief, which entails the same following of Jesus, but with the addition of a more complete understanding that is possible after the resurrection. Clarity on these two forms of belief allow us to see characters such as the disciples as reflecting the ideal response to Jesus, and thus functioning as models for the reader to emulate, despite their limited understanding within the narrative. They believe as best as they are able. For the reader now, however, such lack of understanding is no longer acceptable, as the gift of the Spirit enables the necessary understanding.

⁴¹ Amongst other works, this project has produced P. N. Anderson, F. Just, S.J., and T. Thatcher, ed., *John, Jesus, and History* (3 vols; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007–2016).