

## Untrustworthy Believers: The Rhetorical Strategy of the Johannine Language of Commitment and Belief

### Abstract

The Gospel of John seeks to evoke belief, the kind of belief that leads to eternal life (20:31). Yet the language of belief is used to challenge the reader, as in 2:23-25 there are believers whose faith falls short of the belief that leads to life. This account confronts a reader unprepared for the appearance of inadequate faith. In confronting the reader, the scene serves a rhetorical function to provoke the reader to question why this faith falls short, and what genuine belief entails. This pattern is repeated in a series of episodes (6:60-71; 8:30-31; 15:1-6) where characters are described in terms of faith and commitment, and yet in each case the narrative conveys that their faith-response is inadequate. These episodes contribute to a rhetorical strategy whereby readers are continually challenged to understand the nature of genuine belief, in order that they might take on such genuine belief themselves.

### Keywords

John's Gospel – belief – commitment – rhetorical strategy

### 1. Introduction

Belief is a key theme in the Gospel of John.<sup>1</sup> Its declared purpose is to evoke

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I would like to thank Francis J. Moloney and Willis H. Salier for their comments on the draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> The centrality of belief in the Gospel of John is reflected in numerous studies of belief. However, many of these have focused on grammatical constructions, seeking to identify the propositional content of belief, or identifying the relationship between believing and other important ideas in the Gospel. These include: G.F. Hawthorne, "The Concept of Faith in the Fourth Gospel," *BSac* 116, no. 462 (1959) 117-26; A. Decourtray, "La conception johannique de la foi," *NRTh* 81, no. 6 (1959) 562-76; J. Gaffney, "Believing and Knowing in the Fourth Gospel," *TS* 26 (1965) 215-41; H. Schlier, "Glauben, Erkennen, Lieben nach dem Johannesevangelium," in *Besinnung auf das neue Testament* (ed. H. Schlier; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.; Freiburg: Herder, 1967) 279-93; S. Schneiders, "Reflections on Commitment in the Gospel According to John," *BTB* 8 no. 1 (1978) 40-8; C.R. Koester, "Hearing, Seeing, and Believing in the Gospel of John," *Bib* 70, no. 3 (1989) 327-48; M.M. Thompson, "Signs and Faith in the Fourth Gospel," *BBR* 1 (1991) 89-108; N. Ueberschaer, "Das Johannesevangelium als Medium der Glaubensvermittlung," in *Glaube*, (eds. J. Frey, B. Schliesser & N. Ueberschaer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 451-71. Those commentaries with excurses on faith include R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB 29; 2 vols.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-70) 1:512-515; R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (3 vols.; New

belief, and belief is intended to lead to eternal life (20:31). Yet at the same time, belief and the associated language of commitment is used in surprising, confusing and even challenging ways. In four key episodes, we are presented with the believers whom Jesus does not trust (2:23-25), the disciples who no longer follow (6:60-66), those who apparently believe yet call Jesus demon-possessed (8:30-48), and the ‘branches’ who are in Jesus, but cast out (15:1-6).<sup>2</sup> These four passages are significant, for in each, people are described with the language of faith and commitment, be that believing, being a disciple, or being in Jesus. Yet at the same time, the narrative context of each of these passages gives strong indications that these people do not in fact demonstrate a belief that leads to life. This raises the question as to what the terms of faith and commitment are intended to convey in these situations. It is the contention of this paper that if these passages are considered in succession then we will uncover a significant rhetorical strategy enacted through these passages, which pushes the reader to question the nature of genuine belief, so that they might come to express genuine belief as it is presented in the Gospel.<sup>3</sup>

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York: Herder & Herder, 1968-1982) 1:563-567; L.L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 296-298.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that one of the clearest examples of John using faith terminology to indicate different qualities of faith responses is omitted. In John 10:37-38 believing in Jesus is contrasted with believing in his works as a lesser response, but nevertheless a potential step towards genuine belief. However, while these verses may contribute to understanding genuine belief, they do not have the same rhetorical function of provoking the reader to question the nature of genuine belief.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the studies on belief noted above, other scholars have considered the strategy of the Gospel with regard to moving the reader towards belief, primarily by focusing on the role of the characters within the narrative. A first approach is to see the characters as typifying belief responses: F.J. Moloney, “From Cana to Cana (Jn 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 Press, 1978) 185-213; E. Liebert, “That you may believe: The Fourth Gospel and Structural Developmental Theory,” *BTB* 14, no. 2 (1984) 72-3; B.W. Henault, “John 4:43-54 and the Ambivalent Narrator: A response to Culpepper’s Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 19, no. 3 (1990) 297; R. Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015) 16. A second approach is to see the characters presented in ways to facilitate reader identification with them, and thus follow them on a journey of faith: R.F. Collins, “The Representative Figures of the Fourth Gospel - 1,” *The Downside Review* 94, no. 314 (1976) 31; J.M. Howard, “The Significance of Minor Characters in the Gospel of John,” *BSac* 163, no. 649 (2006) 77-8; C. Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 19-20; R.A. Culpepper, “The Weave of the Tapestry: Character and Theme in John,” in *Characters and Characterisation in the Gospel of John* (ed. C.W. Skinner; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013) 35. J. Zumstein (“L’évangile johannique: une stratégie du croire,” in *Miettes Exégétiques* [ed. J. Zumstein; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1991], 244-9) argues the

This paper will use the term ‘genuine belief’ as indicating ‘belief that leads to life’, which is the belief that the Gospel explicitly seeks to evoke (20:31).<sup>4</sup> While ‘genuine belief’ is not a term explicitly used in the Gospel, it is a helpful category with which to work. If there are forms of belief presented within the Gospel which do not result in life, then they must be considered as inadequate forms of belief by the standard of the Gospel. While the call to believe is central, the ideal response to Jesus is expressed through a range of expressions, including being true worshippers (4:23-4), being disciples (8:31), abiding in Jesus (15:1-10), and keeping his commands (14:15). These varied expressions are used to convey a response to Jesus that entails faith and commitment, a response that the characters of the Gospel may embody to varying degrees or not at all. In assessing the responses depicted in the Gospel, we will look at reactions from Jesus or the narrator that either affirm or challenge a particular expression of faith and commitment, along with any links drawn to the reward of eternal life, which is the result of genuine belief. Using these markers is preferable to seeking evidence of imperfections in expressions of faith, as it may be that the response which Jesus accepts may still include some flaws.<sup>5</sup>

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rhetorical strategy of the Gospel is effected through characters who progress, or are challenged to progress, from an elementary belief to Johannine belief; this strategy is complemented by the use of implicit commentary. This aspect of the Johannine rhetorical strategy can be seen as the positive counterpart to that investigated in the present study. While Zumstein and many of the other studies mentioned here consider the impact of characters who display belief or movement towards belief, the present study considers the impact of occasions where characters fail to go on to genuine belief.

<sup>4</sup> While John uses only the verb to speak of believing, and not the noun, to mirror such usage in English would be unwieldy. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a complete description of genuine belief. Instead, those features of genuine belief that are highlighted by the passages under consideration will be noted, with the recognition that there may be further elements not addressed here.

<sup>5</sup> Characters display varying degrees of understanding with regard to Jesus, and while for some misunderstanding leads to abandoning Jesus (6:60-66), for others misunderstanding does not preclude commitment to Jesus, and may be accompanied by a desire to know more. This is most notable with the disciples, but the Samaritan woman (4:1-30) and the blind man (9:1-38) both seek to rectify their lack of understanding. Misunderstanding alone is not a marker of inadequate faith.

## 2. Untrustworthy Believers - John 2:23-25

The Gospel of John sets up the categories of right and wrong responses to Jesus in the prologue. After initially describing these responses in terms of knowing and receiving, they are then cast in terms of believing. Those who receive Jesus are also described as *τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ* (1:12), with the implication that those who do not receive him also do not believe. These responses are seen in the characters in the following narrative, as the disciples respond in faith, confessing Jesus in messianic terms, before their faith is made explicit in response to the sign at Cana (2:11). A contrast is evident with the response of the Jews in the second part of the chapter, who reject Jesus' claims and demand a sign (2:18-20). Thus far, the faith-responses are relatively uncomplicated and accord with the framework suggested by the prologue.

But then in 2:23-25 comes an account that jars with the reader.<sup>6</sup> There are many people in Jerusalem who believe in Jesus, having seen the signs he performed. But Jesus does not entrust himself to them. What is more, their belief is expressed as *ἐπίστευσαν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ* (2:23), the same construction used in 1:12, a construction that is often understood as conveying genuine belief.<sup>7</sup> By using the same verb for both the crowd's faith and Jesus' response, as he *οὐκ ἐπίστευεν αὐτὸν αὐτοῖς* (2:24), the writer has created a deliberate contrast. The contrast indicates that there is something less than ideal in the faith-response of the crowd, and the deliberate nature of the contrast implies the shortcoming is more than a minor detail. This account jars with the reader because as yet nothing in the Gospel narrative has given the reader any grounds to expect anything besides belief and unbelief. The impact upon the reader is heightened by the particular expression used, for if any expression should indicate genuine belief, one would expect

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, in his study of belief in chapters 2-4, Moloney ("From Cana to Cana," 191) brackets out this episode, although he does indicate it has a role in communicating to the reader what author is seeking to do with regard to conveying his concept of belief.

<sup>7</sup> Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:263; G.R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987) 13.

it to be ‘believing in the name of Jesus’, as it has been used in the prologue to describe those who are also adopted as children of God.

The shortcoming of the belief recorded in this passage is evident in light of the prologue, where there is a sense of reciprocity that is envisaged in the relationship between the believer and Jesus (1:12-13).<sup>8</sup> That reciprocity, here denied, becomes more central in the farewell discourse in the idea of mutual indwelling (14:20, 23; 15:4-5; 17:21, 26). Therefore, the faith described here cannot be equated with the genuine belief that the Gospel seeks to evoke. A belief that is not fully recognized by Jesus is not the belief that leads to life. We must conclude that the author designates these people as believing by using the phrase from 1:12 even though their belief does not live up to the standard of this Gospel, and thus they are not genuine believers.<sup>9</sup>

The discord between the description of faith and the evidence of inadequacy provoke the reader to question the nature of genuine faith. This is especially the case given there is the lack of a clear explanation of what makes this belief less than ideal. We are only informed that Jesus’ understanding of what was within a person (2:25) led him not to entrust himself to them, with the implication that the deficiency is found in the internal attitudes of these ‘believers’. The rhetorical function of this passage has been obscured by the argument that the faith of these ‘untrustworthy believers’ falls short as it was based on seeing signs.<sup>10</sup> Providing an explanation of the shortcoming of

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<sup>8</sup> F.J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (SP 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998) 85. Koester (“Hearing, Seeing, and Believing,” 332) points to the contrast with the belief of 2:11, as there Jesus goes with the disciples, tacitly approving of their faith, while he distances himself from the crowd here.

<sup>9</sup> Tam writes that “These verses give hints that some professing faith could be unreliable.” J.C. Tam, “When Papyri and Codices Speak: Revisiting John 2,23-25,” *Bib* 95, no. 4 (2014) 587. Similarly, N. Farely (*The Disciples in the Fourth Gospel* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010] 50) observes, the implied reader has “learned that the implied author could use such a term to refer to what may appear as true belief but actually is not so.”

<sup>10</sup> Both Craig Keener and Beasley-Murray, commenting on this passage, describe signs faith as inadequate. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 47; C.S. Keener, *The Gospel of John : A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:531; see also Moloney, “From Cana to Cana,” 192. Rudolf Bultmann (*The Gospel of John* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1971] 131, 209) has played a significant role in the negative assessment of

faith in 2:23, an explanation that is not explicit in the text, diminishes our ability to recognize that the effect of this passage upon the reader is primarily to raise a question, not to provide an answer.<sup>11</sup> The reader is alerted to the complexity of belief in the Johannine account, and therefore the need to seek a richer understanding of the response that is sought.

### 3. Wayward Disciples - John 6:60-71

A similar problem to that seen in 2:23-25 arises when we come to chapter six, which describes a crowd who displays commitment to Jesus, and who are called ‘disciples’. Jesus’ actions are interpreted by the crowd in messianic terms, as they acclaim him as ὁ προφήτης, and seek to make him king (6:14-5). The crowd then displays a commitment to follow Jesus, at least in a physical sense (6:22-25). Despite the difficulties provoked by Jesus’ teaching, as the crowd grumble (6:41) and dispute (6:52), they are called μαθηταί (6:60). The crowd are given this designation even as they continue to grumble about the challenging nature of Jesus’ teaching (6:60-1). So far there is no problem—these people appear to be followers of Jesus who are wrestling with some challenging aspects of his teaching.

However, these disciples cease to be disciples. The telling point comes in 6:66 when πολλοὶ [ἐκ] τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ ἀπῆλθον εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω καὶ οὐκέτι μετ’ αὐτοῦ

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signs faith, arguing that real faith was based on nothing more than the revelation of Jesus, and whilst there may have been other helps, that was only on account of the weakness of man. Thus, faith aroused by signs was of doubtful value, and no more than a first step towards Jesus. However, the problem for faith with regard to signs is what is perceived through the sign, not merely the role of the sign in evoking belief. W.H. Salier, *The Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia in the Gospel of John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 59.

<sup>11</sup> The following episode with Nicodemus has been understood as linked to this passage by the repetition of ἄνθρωπος (2:25; 3:1). As such, it may provide an elaboration of the shortcoming of belief displayed here. However, whilst the Nicodemus pericope is significant for the question of Johannine faith, it does not form part of the rhetorical strategy considered in this paper. On the connection between 2:23-25 and 3:1 see Moloney, *John*, 89-91; M.W.G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993) 53-4; J.M. Bassler, “Mixed Signals: Nicodemus in the Fourth Gospel,” *JBL* 108, no. 4 (1989) 637; Brown, *John*, 1:137. Not all accept this connection, see Tam, “Papyri,” 583-4; P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1989) 279-80; Bultmann, *John*, 133.

περιεπάτουν.<sup>12</sup> These disciples turn away because they are unable or unwilling to accept Jesus' word (6:60). These supposed 'disciples' lack commitment, in failing to go on following, and they also lack faith. Jesus tells this group that some of them do not believe, which explains their grumbling and failure to accept his teaching (6:64-65).<sup>13</sup> They are contrasted emphatically with the Twelve, who accept Jesus' words as 'the words of life', and remain disciples (6:68). For them, believing is central to their decision to remain with Jesus (6:69).<sup>14</sup> The other disciples are unwilling to go beyond their partial understanding of Jesus that was reflected in 6:14-15, in contrast to the greater understanding reflected in the confession of the Twelve (6:68-9). This is a second example where John uses the language of faith and commitment to describe those whose response falls short.

The reader is again challenged by the turn in the story and the use of the language of faith and commitment to question what the desired response entails. The designation 'disciple' is used throughout the chapter, but in the earlier part it appears to be used of a smaller group of followers in contrast to the broader crowd (6:3-5, 16, 22). Thus, it appears to distinguish a core group who were committed followers, not simply the crowd come to see a miracle worker. Therefore, the rhetorical impact upon the reader is heightened, as these supposedly committed followers shockingly turn away. The text leads the reader to suspect that maybe even the Twelve will turn away, a suspicion that is partially validated as Judas' betrayal is foreshadowed (6:70-1). However, unlike in 2:23-25, the reader is presented with the contrast between the disciples who turn away and the Twelve who remain. The contrasts highlight the need to accept Jesus' message, and to go beyond an inadequate understanding of who Jesus is. Therefore, this passage functions to begin to fill in the picture of what defines

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<sup>12</sup> Keener, *John*, 1:695.

<sup>13</sup> A.T. Lincoln (*The Gospel According to Saint John* [BNTC; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013] 238) has observed the way the narratorial aside here recalls that of 2:23-24.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, *John*, 1:298.

genuine belief and true discipleship in contrast to those cases where faith and commitment falls short.

#### 4. Believers, yet not True Disciples - John 8:30-31

In John chapter eight, again there are characters who are described as believing, but their subsequent actions are problematic. In 8:21-29, Jesus teaches about his heavenly origin, stressing the need to believe this aspect of his identity (8:24). The section concludes with the statement that many believed (8:30), expressed in the form πολλοὶ ἐπίστευσαν εἰς αὐτόν. Given the preceding focus of Jesus' teaching, it is most likely the belief indicated here is belief in Jesus' heavenly origin. Jesus' next section of teaching is introduced by saying that Jesus was speaking πρὸς τοὺς πεπιστευκότας αὐτῷ Ἰουδαίους (8:31), now expressing the object of belief with the dative rather than a prepositional phrase. However, the crowd respond negatively to Jesus' words, and go on to call him demon-possessed (8:48), before turning on him with murderous intent (8:59). These actions are not compatible with belief, as they run completely counter to the acceptance of Jesus that has been presented as an intrinsic part of the response of belief since the prologue (1:10-12). Therefore, the same issue arises as in 2:23-25 and 6:60-66, that people are described as believing, but appear not to have genuine belief.

The challenge posed by the clash between the actions of the crowd and their designation as believing has resulted in attempts to argue for a change in referent between 8:30 and 8:31 so that 8:30 reflects genuine belief, while 8:31 refers to a different group whose response is lacking.<sup>15</sup> Griffith sets out the case most clearly, arguing that 8:31 begins a new section on five grounds: (1) the use of the name 'Jesus'

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<sup>15</sup> While some scholars have argued for 8:31 as a later edition, this paper is concerned with the rhetorical effect of the final form of the Gospel. Those arguing such an addition include C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: SPCK, 1955), 284-285; Brown, *John*, 1:354. Although in the second edition of his commentary, Barrett rejects this idea of later interpolation. C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; London: SPCK, 1978), 344.



after αὐτόν in 8:30, (2) the addition of τοὺς Ἰουδαίους, (3) the changed verbal construction, (4) the word order placing ‘Jews’ in the final emphatic position, and (5) the choice of the perfect participle.<sup>16</sup>

The identification of a new section beginning at 8:31 is unconvincing. With regard to Griffith’s first two points, both Jesus and the Jews are explicitly named within the preceding section, immediately after having similarly been referred to with a third person pronoun (Jews in 8:22, Jesus in 8:25). It is a feature of Johannine style rather than a marker of a new section. On Griffith’s third point, the suggestion that there are different referents for verses 30 and 31 based on the different grammatical expressions with πιστεύω finds its origins in a common but oversimplified view of how these expressions are used. Both Dodd and de la Potterie made the argument that the use of the dative with πιστεύω indicates a more limited sense of credence, whereas using εἰς indicates the elements of trust and reliance inherent in Christian faith.<sup>17</sup> However, Dodd acknowledges 8:30-31 as an exception to the rule, seeing a continuity of referent.<sup>18</sup> The division of meaning proposed by Dodd and de la Potterie is too stark, as the two expressions are used in John with a significant degree of overlap.<sup>19</sup> The use of the dative can indicate the kind of genuine belief the Gospel seeks to evoke (10:37), while as seen above, the use of εἰς does not always indicate genuine belief (2:23). The overlap between the two expressions means that the change from one to the other in 8:30-31 does not imply a change in referent. For the fourth point, while the word order emphasizes these believing Jews as the subject, that does not require a new section; it

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<sup>16</sup> T. Griffith, “‘The Jews Who Had Believed in Him’ (John 8:31) and the Motif of Apostasy in the Gospel of John,” in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (eds. R.J. Bauckham & C. Mosser; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 186.

<sup>17</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1968) 183; I. de la Potterie, *La vérité dans saint Jean* (2 vols; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1977) 2:842-3.

<sup>18</sup> The difficulty with aligning these verses with the distinction in meaning for the two expressions are echoed in Hawthorne (“The Concept of Faith in the Fourth Gospel,” 118), although he appears less willing to acknowledge it as an exception.

<sup>19</sup> Ueberschaer (“Das Johannesevangelium als Medium der Glaubensvermittlung,” 467, 470-1) sees both overlap and distinction between these two constructions.

could simply indicate that Jesus specifically addresses a part of the crowd before him. The perfect participle alone cannot signify a new section, and while Griffith refers to the “marked perfect participle” he makes no mention of what it is marked for, or why. The use of the perfect participle is the logical way for the author to refer back to those who have just believed, as it indicates past action, pointing back to 8:30, whilst also indicating that their believing continues. Nor is there any evidence upon which to interpret the participle in 8:31 as pluperfect rather than perfect, as Griffith does, beyond the challenge of resolving this description of belief with the later actions of the crowd.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, there is no need to understand 8:31 as a new section, or that the believers of 8:31 are anyone other than the believers of 8:30, with no indication they have ceased to believe.

The most logical way to understand the relationship of these two verses is that they have the same referent. The two sentences are linked with οὖν, and in narrative contexts, οὖν signifies both development and close connection.<sup>21</sup> In the absence of any clear markers indicating a change, the element of connection in οὖν favors a continuity of referent. While Jesus is going on to a new topic in the discourse (the development), there is continuity in setting and audience (the connection). Jesus is speaking to “those who believed”, to that part of the crowd who has just responded.

This continuity is significant for the reader, for the dialogue that ensues serves to advance the understanding of what is entailed by genuine belief. Despite the description of a believing response, in the remainder of chapter eight opposition to Jesus grows, to the point where Jesus is called demon possessed (8:48). It is possible that these

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<sup>20</sup> Griffith (“Apostasy,” 183-184) himself states it is the context that leads him to this understanding. See also J. Swetnam, “The Meaning of πεπιστευχότας in John 8,31,” *Bib* 61, no. 1 (1980), 106-9.

<sup>21</sup> S.E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2010) 43; see also R. Buth, “Οὖν, Δέ, Καί, and Asyndeton in John’s Gospel,” in *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Discourse Analysis* (ed. D.A. Black; Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 157; S.H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek* (2 edn; SIL International, 2000) 82.

accusations are made by part of the wider crowd that has been present from the start of the chapter, who were not included in the Jesus' particular focus on those who did believe in 8:31-32.<sup>22</sup> Yet there is no clear indicator of a shift in dialogue partners. Therefore, even if others utter the charge of demon-possession, the way in which those who are said to believe then dissolve into the general hostility of the crowd, with no hint that they have retained their faith, suggests to the reader that their faith, such as it was, has failed.<sup>23</sup> As with the 'disciples' in chapter six, people who are denoted as believing are then included in the rejection of Jesus' message, and so they prove not to be genuine believers.

Yet unlike in previous examples, Jesus highlights what these believers need to do to become genuine believers. In 8:31-32 he calls them to a more complete commitment to him, to become true disciples. The implication is that they are not yet true disciples, which aligns with the understanding that their belief is primarily an acceptance of Jesus' heavenly origin, and therefore that they have only accepted a part of Jesus' message. They are called upon to *μείνητε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῷ ἐμῷ* (8:31), to go on to a more complete and ongoing acceptance of Jesus' message. This reinforces what was seen in the previous example, where the disciples of chapter 6 fail to accept Jesus' word, thereby failing to be true disciples. In the narrative of chapter eight, the call to true discipleship is not received, and the crowd reject Jesus' message, so the reader can see why their believing falls short. Thus, the reader is vividly shown a key part of the Johannine concept of genuine belief, and the rhetorical strategy is guiding them towards an understanding that such genuine belief is complex in nature.

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<sup>22</sup> S. Motyer (*Your Father the Devil? : A New Approach to John and 'the Jews'* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997] 162-163) argues for understanding the crowd as expanding as an explanation for the shift from belief to hostility.

<sup>23</sup> Lincoln (*John*, 269) describes this as 'pseudo belief'.

## 5. The ‘In’ Cast Out - John 15:1-6

The final and perhaps most controversial example of unbelieving believers in John comes in chapter fifteen. In the vine image, Jesus describes two types of branches, those that bear fruit and those that do not (15:2). The word play with *καθαίρει* (15:2) and *καθαροί* (15:3) indicates that the disciples are to be identified with the branches that bear fruit. The challenge for interpreters is found with the branches that do not bear fruit. The combination of describing these branches as *ἐν ἐμοί*, that is, in Jesus, and that they are removed (15:2) and destroyed (15:6), appears to say that real believers can be removed from Jesus if their faith does not have visible results. This is a challenge for interpreters, especially for those who hold a doctrine of perseverance. More broadly, the suggestion that faith must meet performance standards clashes with the assertion that it is simply faith that leads to life (3:15, 16; 20:31).

Perhaps as a result of the theological challenges raised by this passage, there have been attempts to avoid having to put these two attributes together, branches being both in Jesus, but also destroyed. One attempt is to take *ἐν ἐμοί* as adverbial rather than adjectival, modifying *φέρω*.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the branches that are to be destroyed are not said to be in Jesus, rather ‘in Jesus’ is only the sphere in which fruit bearing ought to take place. This is grammatically possible, and other uses of *ἐν ἐμοί* in chapter fifteen are adverbial. However, they are all either ‘being in me’ or ‘abiding in me’, and therefore indicate connection to Jesus rather than the realm in which an action is performed. As van der Watt argues, the elements of the image in 15:2 are suspended metaphors, which are explained later in the text.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the following use of ‘in me’ should shape the interpretation of this verse, and it is more consistent with the meaning of the passage to understand *ἐν ἐμοί* as adjectival, modifying ‘branches’.

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<sup>24</sup> J.C. Laney, “Abiding Is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1-6,” *BSac* 146, no. 581 (1989) 63.

<sup>25</sup> J.A. van der Watt, *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel according to John* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) 38.

If the branches are accepted as being ‘in Jesus’, another attempt to resolve the problems of this passage is to argue that αἶρω should be understood as ‘lift up’ rather than ‘remove’.<sup>26</sup> However, all other uses in John have the sense of ‘remove’ (2:16; 19:31) or of ‘lift, with a view to removing’ (5:8,9). This, along with the tenuous nature of arguments based on modern agricultural practice, suggest ‘remove’ is the meaning of αἶρω here.<sup>27</sup> The characteristically Johannine binary imagery, where branches either abide and bear fruit, or do not abide and are thrown out, indicates that βάλλω (15:6) is parallel to αἶρω (15:2). Thus αἶρω denotes removal, and the non fruit bearing branches are delivered to the fire, an image of destruction and judgement.<sup>28</sup>

There is, however, another interpretation that resolves the aforementioned theological objections. What is needed is an understanding of the Johannine terminology of being ‘in Jesus’. As Bauckham has noted, we must not read in a Pauline idea of an established spiritual reality, as the Johannine use of ‘in Jesus’ is primarily relational.<sup>29</sup> Abiding has already been linked to faith and commitment, as in chapter

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<sup>26</sup> J.M. Boice, *The Gospel of John* (5 vols; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 4.228; G.W. Derickson, “Viticulture and John 15:1–6,” *BSac* 153, no. 609 (1996) 45-6.

<sup>27</sup> Van der Watt (*Family of the King*, 29, 50) argues against over-interpreting the image, noting that many other details of vine farming are not mentioned, but rather it is a simple, clear image, using general shared knowledge. This passage does not use standard agricultural language since it is primarily about people not plants, and so the vineyard image should not be pushed too far. So too Laney, “Abiding Is Believing,” 57. While Derickson (“Viticulture and John 15:1–6,” 37) claims that καθαίρω is a standard term for pruning, and thus αἶρω is used stylistically, he provides no evidence. Dodd (*Interpretation*, 136) can point only to a single Hellenistic instance (in Philo, *De Somn.* 2.64) for using καθαίρω with this sense. Indeed, Derickson’s own evidence undermines his view, as from Pliny he says ancient pruning involved removing the branches that have borne fruit, while the fruitless branches are left in order to bear fruit the next season, the opposite image to 15:2. Boice (*John*, 4.228) meanwhile engages in a linguistic fallacy in insisting upon ‘lifting up’ as the ‘fundamental’ meaning of αἶρω here.

<sup>28</sup> This image aligns with the Old Testament use of the vine image (esp. Ezek 15:1-8), with no suggestion of survival, testing, or later reward after this fire. Thus, the fire cannot be understood in parallel to 1 Cor 3:15, as Joseph Dillow argues. J.C. Dillow, “Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6,” *BSac* 147, no. 585 (1990) 53.

<sup>29</sup> Bauckham (*Gospel of Glory*, 12) sees a key distinction in that John’s concept is reciprocal, where that of Paul is never so. Van der Watt (*Family of the King*, 42-3) argues that it is invalid to assume ontological or essential unity merely because that is so for the vine and branches. Brown (*John*, 1:632) points to it primarily as unity of action (in terms of relationship of Father and Son), while Edward Malatesta (*Interiority and Covenant*, [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978] 25, 306-7) sees Ex. 6:7 ‘I will be your

eight to abide in Jesus' word is crucial in order to be a true disciple (8:31; cf. 5:38). The earlier language is evoked in chapter fifteen with the call for τὰ ῥήματά μου ἐν ὑμῖν μέινῃ (15:7), before highlighting the relational dimension of abiding, as the disciples are to μέινετε ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ τῇ ἐμῇ (15:9). The call to go on in such a relationship suggests that what is in view is not a fixed status, but a relationship that must be maintained and strengthened. Therefore, this passage can be understood in the same fashion as the preceding three. To be 'in me' indicates having some form of relationship with Jesus, but the failure to bear fruit indicates that from the perspective of the Gospel they fail to display genuine belief. As such, this passage uses language that indicates faith and commitment, without implying genuine belief.

John 15:1-6 continues the rhetorical strategy that has been identified in the preceding three passages, to provoke the reader to seek a greater understanding of genuine belief. As the pattern of using the language of faith and commitment to refer to inadequate faith responses has been used repeatedly, this example may not surprise the reader as much. Yet there is the possibility that the reader has settled on an understanding of genuine belief as a result of the passages in chapter six and eight, that it requires a complete and ongoing acceptance of Jesus' word. The reader is further challenged that genuine belief is more complex still. As in chapter eight, this passage is explicit about what makes the response of faith and commitment here fall short, for it is the failure to bear fruit. Against the possibility that a reader may see the need only for inward acceptance of the message, the necessity of outward and visible response is conveyed in striking imagery with the threat of destruction.<sup>30</sup> The concept of belief is so

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God and you will be my people' behind this language.

<sup>30</sup> The visible nature of bearing fruit is implied in 15:8, where it is the demonstration of discipleship. Some argue that bearing fruit is to be understood in a missional context, linked to 4:36, so P. Bolt, "What Fruit Does the Vine Bear? Some Pastoral Implications of John 15:1-8," *RTR* 51, no. 1 (1992) 17; B. Witherington III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 258. However, love and obedience are more prominent than mission in the Farewell Discourse, and thus bearing fruit is better understood more broadly than just mission. L.L. Morris, *John*, 595; R. Schnackenburg, *John*, 3.100; D. Lee, "Friendship, Love and Abiding in the Gospel of John," in

central to this Gospel that such striking rhetoric is used to ensure the reader will grasp the complexity of what it is to genuinely believe.

Across these four passages, we have established a common pattern with regard to the language of faith and commitment, each contributing to a rhetorical purpose. There are characters who are described in terms of faith and commitment, before doubt is cast upon their response, by the narrator, by Jesus, or by their own words and actions. Thus, it is evident that for John to describe someone as ‘believing’, a ‘disciple’, or ‘in Jesus’, does not in itself convey genuine belief. Rather it indicates some connection to Jesus or some understanding of who he is, yet this understanding and commitment can be incomplete or limited. The coherent pattern is strengthened as in each case the characters are an anonymous group, about whom we know nothing more than that they had some form of connection to Jesus. The anonymity facilitates the reader’s generalizing of the problem of inadequate belief. It is not the problem of an identified individual, but rather anyone could fall short of the standard of genuine belief. The effect of this Johannine rhetorical strategy is to bring the reader to question the nature of genuine belief, and to highlight some of the key features of such genuine belief in contrast to that which falls short.<sup>31</sup>

## 6. An Objection

One possible objection to the pattern that has been highlighted relates to the apparently binary nature of belief in John, whereby John establishes that there are two possible responses to Jesus, either believing and receiving him, or failing to do so (1:10-

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*Transcending Boundaries: Contemporary Readings of the New Testament: Essays in Honor of Francis J. Moloney* (eds. R. M. Chennattu, et al.; Rome: LAS, 2005) 65.

<sup>31</sup> There may be a further example that fits within this pattern, that of the so-called secret believers (12:42-3). They are also described as believing (12:42), in contrast to the many who did not believe (12:37) yet display an attitude incompatible with genuine belief in seeking glory from man not God (12:43). However, space precludes the adequate discussion of this passage, which may be addressed in subsequent research.

13; 3:15-21; 5:28-29). This binary language appears to preclude anything more than these two categories, and as such has been the grounds for objections to models that identify more than two stages of faith.<sup>32</sup> If John operates with a binary framework of belief and unbelief, then it is pertinent to ask whether there can be such thing as an unbelieving believer, someone who believes without having genuine belief.

The answer is found in properly distinguishing between words and concepts. This has been an issue in biblical scholarship for decades, brought to prominence by Barr, but still often not sufficiently recognized. Indeed, Raymond Brown's work on πιστεύω has been criticized on precisely these grounds.<sup>33</sup> The binary language of John conveys a conceptual dualism that distinguishes between genuine belief, that is the belief that leads to life, and all other responses that are effectively unbelief. The error in interpretation comes when we equate that concept of genuine belief with an individual word. It is a mistake to assume that πιστεύω is to be equated with John's concept of genuine belief, or to do the same with being a disciple or being 'in me'. These words can be used to indicate a range of relationships, and it is only the context that reveals whether a particular instance refers to genuine belief.

The characters in the Gospel display the author's awareness of the complexity of belief. There are characters who make a partial commitment, or who partially accept Jesus' message (6:14-15,66; 4:1-42). Such responses are not designated by specific words, phrases or grammatical constructions in order to distinguish partial or

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<sup>32</sup> Brown, Moloney and Culpepper all present more than two categories of faith response. Brown, *John*, 1:530-531; Moloney, "From Cana to Cana," 200; R.A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 146-148. Those rejecting anything other than belief and unbelief include Z.C. Hodges, "Problem Passages in the Gospel of John Part II: Untrustworthy Believers—John 2:23-25," *BSac* 135, no. 538 (1978) 144; Henault, "John 4:43-54 and the Ambivalent Narrator," 297.

<sup>33</sup> J. E. Botha, "The Meanings of Pisteúō in the Greek New Testament: A Semantic-Lexicographical Study," *Neot* 21, no. 2 (1987) re 227-30; J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 202-262.



developing belief from the genuine belief which the Gospel presents as the goal. The underlying binary framework of belief is not undermined, for if a response remains at this intermediate level, it is insufficient, hence the call to go on to genuine belief (e.g. 8:31-2). Some characters may progress to genuine belief within the Gospel narrative, while for others the development of genuine belief may lie beyond the account of the Gospel. What these responses demonstrate is that genuine belief is not necessarily attained instantaneously, on account of the complex nature of what it means to believe, a complexity to which the rhetoric of John draws the reader's attention.

## 7. Conclusion

In considering this series of passages in John, a pattern has emerged in the way language of faith and commitment is used. There are those described as believers, but whose faith is demonstrably less than that which the Gospel seeks to evoke, either through the lack of trust from Jesus (2:23-25), or their involvement in hostility and violence towards Jesus (8:30-59). This pattern of usage of πιστεύω is matched by the use of 'disciple', as there are disciples who in some sense follow Jesus, but then cease to do so (6:60-66). Finally, John also uses 'in me' to indicate those who are connected to Jesus, but who fail to bear fruit, and thereby display their lack of genuine belief. The Johannine language of faith and commitment can be used to indicate those whose response falls short of the ideal.

This paper has argued that the pattern of usage comprises a rhetorical strategy to provoke the reader to question the nature of true belief. The first example is the most striking, as the reader has only been prepared to encounter responses of genuine belief or unbelief. Thus, the belief that is unbelief in 2:23 raises the question as to what makes belief genuine. The following examples similarly juxtapose a description of faith or commitment with clear shortcomings, but in doing so they offer some clarification as to

the distinction between genuine belief and that which falls short. These passages alone do not convey all that it is to genuinely believe, the theme of belief permeates the Gospel and many passages contribute to the Johannine concept of belief. But those examined in this paper serve to draw the reader's attention to the complexity of genuine belief, and leads them to search the Gospel to know what it is to genuinely believe.

This rhetorical strategy leads to important conclusions for our study of John's Gospel. If the reader's attention is deliberately drawn to the complexity of belief, then any investigation of faith and commitment in John cannot simply observe the centrality of belief in the Gospel, but must account for this complexity. Previous investigations have fallen short of this, either by focusing solely on identifying genuine versus inadequate belief, or by having a narrow focus on the lexeme πιστεύω. However, to properly account for the complexity of the Johannine concept, approaches are needed that clearly acknowledge the division between concept and word. There must be a recognition that the concept of faith is conveyed through a range of terms, along with analyzing the way the narrative context presents expressions of belief, for as this paper has shown, the nature of belief is tied to the rhetoric of belief. All of these are necessary if we are to properly understand the Johannine concept of belief.