

Cornelis Bennema. *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John*. Second Edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

Cornelis Bennema's considerable literary output includes three books and at least seventeen academic articles, most of which are focused on Johannine studies. The volume under review is a revised version of an original 2009 publication, and is paired with a more theoretical companion volume (*A Theory of Character in NT Narrative*), itself an expansion of a 2009 article. Bennema's aim in *Encountering Jesus* is to reinvigorate the study of the Fourth Gospel by focusing on its characters, and overturning a too common reading of many of them as "flat" characters or types. The second edition responds to criticisms by paying more attention to the relationship between character and plot, refining terminology, and adding a chapter on Jesus.

Chapter one lays out the groundwork. Previous works on character in John have lacked either a theory of character or comprehensiveness of treatment. Bennema embraces a "text-centred approach" (23), dependent on "historical narrative criticism" (41) in which authorial intention is (theoretically) recoverable. In other words, the interpreter pays attention to both literary cues within the text of the Fourth Gospel and extra-textual data that might clarify the meaning of the text (whether social-scientific, historical, or canonical—Bennema's implied reader of John will also know Mark's gospel).

The author then draws on a heuristic grid developed by Israeli literary critic Yosef Ewen, exploring the three dimensions of complexity, development, and inner life (27). This grid provides a basis for Bennema's analysis of characterization, ranging from agent (flattest), to type, personality, and individual (roundest). Chapter one also sketches an overview of John's story of Jesus, outlining the centrality of the Fourth Gospel's purpose statement (John 20:31) to the entire narrative. This is also central to Bennema's evaluation of each character: How does their faith-response compare to John's explicit goal of persuading readers to "believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God"?

The bulk of this volume is an investigation into each character by means of the above grid. Bennema begins with Jesus as protagonist, and follows with every character who interacts directly with Jesus. The author rightly includes corporate entities as Johannine characters: "the world," "the

Jews,” and so on. For some reason (expedience?) Andrew and Phillip are treated in a single chapter. Some readers might question the decision to omit God the Father—it isn’t clear whether this omission is for literary or theological reasons.

In general, Bennema’s exegesis is even, rather than innovative. Conclusions tend to be consonant with historic Christian readings of John (e.g., the Beloved Disciple is the writer of the gospel and is likely John son of Zebedee; there’s no attempt to “rehabilitate” a “misunderstood” Judas; but appropriate care is taken to nuance the identity of “the Jews” as a character within the gospel). Overall, the grid yields good exegetical results, whether that means agreement or occasional debate with Bennema’s insights.

The book’s conclusion synthesizes the study of character, and makes general remarks about a typology of faith responses to Jesus (as adequate or inadequate) and the role of the characters in the gospel’s plot. The author helpfully distinguishes the complexity and often ambiguity of the human characters, representing a view “from below,” from the absolute dualism of the view “from above,” showing the necessity of both within John’s narrative world.

Bennema then follows with “the contemporary representative value” of the characters—something that might be considered an effort to make them relevant to modern readers. Some readers might be glad for this “practical application” at the end of a long academic study; others (myself included) might see it as a kind of type-casting that weakens an otherwise helpful conclusion. It threatens to reduce the study’s impact, for it seems to want to keep readers tied to one or more faith responses located within the story. However, the narrative itself culminates in a beatitude for “those who believe but haven’t seen” (20:29)—something impossible for every character within the story, but a *sine qua non* for any real-life disciples who exist outside of, and subsequent to, it (cf. 17:20).

While not the final word on character in John, *Encountering Jesus* significantly advances the field of study. It will reward the serious reader in the academy or in the church with new perspectives on, and conversation starters about, this rich Gospel.

*Randy Klassen*, Restorative Justice Coordinator, Mennonite Central Committee Canada, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan