

John 14.6 A think piece

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Part 1

A note on literary theory in relation to biblical text.

Literary theory gives us tools to understand better the way texts work and the interplay between writers as authors, readers and interpreters. In particular, literary theorists ask us to consider the relationship between the linear surface narrative, which has a direction, or flow, and the 'deep structure' of any text, which lies beneath the narrative and within which is constructed meanings, myths, and signs.

To use an actual biblical example, in the story of Jesus walking on the water within the gospels, the linear narrative is of Jesus miraculously walking across stormy water to reach the disciples in the boat; there is a direction of travel which has narrative drive. Jesus is walking. The boat is sailing. Both are going somewhere. In Matthew, the linear structure is interrupted by Peter trying to go to Jesus; the hiatus creates drama but also calls our attention to the deep structure: what is beneath his sinking feet. The deep structure is neatly literally that: the depths of the water contain possible interpretations of death, loss of faith, losing sight of God, salvation, Christological and soteriological signs, Jesus's mastery of the created order and so on. A child's comment: 'what were the fish doing?' is a deep structure question, asking us to construct unknowns in the text just by imagining an answer to the question.

Every reader reads the linear structure in relation to the deep structure differently. Multiple readers, working together, or adding commentary and discovery over time, cause meanings to accrete and different perspectives to be discovered by applying different lenses or filters to the way words are read and understood. That is why it is possible to have a Marxist,¹ psychoanalytic,² or a feminist³ 'reading' of texts for example.

Some literary theorists believe that the meaning of a text is decided by the reader rather than the author and the author is only one (possibly minor) player in the reception and dissemination of meaning. This means that there are multiple ways of attending to a text critically and ways of illuminating it which make it more richly textured and layered for others who go on to read it. Some would go so far as to suggest that the author, even though that person might have written notes or talked about what they intended by writing, is the last person actually to 'know' what it is about and may actually get in the way of interpretation. Texts are considered to be porous and, because no text can contain all the sentences that can actually be written, have gaps and hiatuses which can be filled by the reader's imagination. Poetry and drama in particular, sit in a vast space of unspoken and undescribed meaning and interpretation. The 'best' kind of text is one which engages the reader's

¹ See for example, readings which interrogate class and oppression in Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*.

² For example, in the work of Julia Kristeva. See *Séméiotiké: recherches pour une sémanalyse*

³ For example, Luce Irigaray, examines text in order to show how women are spoken about in texts in ways which signal their function as commodity. *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*

imagination differently every time it is encountered and is capable of grabbing, challenging and/or delighting the reader (or listener) on each occasion.

Scripture is a particularly interesting kind of text when considered in this way. First, it is for most people a translated work, already a text of a text, containing the thought processes of other authors, not all of whom exactly agree on what narrative is on offer or what exact vocabulary is to be employed. Further, the Bible, perhaps more than any other text, has been subject to intense examination of its deep structure, through myriad Bible study groups, reading notes, theological commentary, memorised and repeated passages, and liturgy.

Literary theory has some harsh things to say about readers which insist on a particular kind of meaning within texts (such as proof-texting), arguing that such reductionism in reading is the result of culture and personal wish⁴ rather than openness to engagement, challenge or even bafflement.

But the deep structure of the Bible also comes with another question – how far is it infused with actual divine intention? What is the deep structure of God’s Word? If the authors of Scripture are subordinate to the breathed words of God, what is the interplay *now* between author and reader? It can be argued that Scripture does not need to be ‘understood’ or squeezed dry of its deep structure, but its purpose is less ‘instruction’ than acting as a catalyst for our spiritual instincts and prompts better ways of living in relationship with God and appreciating the mystery of God.

The Gospel of John, perhaps more than any of part of Scripture, stops us in our tracks when we attempt to examine its depths. It is at once seductive and resistant, challenging and mysterious. And that might be because its form and content are more ambitious than we tend to think when we ‘read’ or listen to Scripture.

Part 2

Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

In Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*, the crucifixion scene suddenly changes perspective. A drop of rain falls from the sky, but with the twist in perspective becomes symbolic of God’s grief for the Son as a tear falls from heaven. It is raining; God weeps for God’s Son.

John’s gospel is radically different in form and style from the synoptic gospels. There is a vast array of scholarship on why that should be so, not least David Ford’s recent, slow-burned study, *The Gospel of John, a theological commentary* (Baker Academic 2021).

From a purely literary critical point of view though, it can be argued that John’s gospel dares to do something breath-taking: attempting to write *God’s* perspective of Jesus for human beings, to interrupt our usual way of reading or experiencing narrative and twist it to let us see the divine purpose and intention behind events, sayings and stories. Considered in this way, the gospel is a hugely ambitious project taking us to the limits of language and requiring the reader (or audience) to give up sense-making for mystery.

⁴ For example, Roland Barthes famously pointed to French text about wine being loaded with signs which people seized on to find wine healthful and enjoyable while ignoring semiotics about the dangers of inebriation. He attributed this to a bourgeois culture which wanted to confirm its enjoyment of alcohol and ignore a more balanced view.

To do this requires certain sorts of literary device. First, the magisterial proclamation of the vastness, the ineffable nature of God in Jesus – in the beginning was the Word. Secondly, an account of Jesus's ministry as an outworking of God incarnate, - a demonstration of how God works in the world. Thirdly, an interrogation of the nature of Jesus, so difficult to fathom, because he is a mirror of the Father's nature and purpose. Fourthly, a text full of gaps, bafflement and mystery as human beings come up against the huge purposes of God and their minds and spiritual progress are not ready for it.

Speaking, announcing, proclaiming, performing or writing like this is deeply risky. It risks alienating the reader from curiosity – if it is not human enough, the person of Jesus can slip away into shadows, as a ghost or a divine being, possessed of incredible superpowers. Whenever we approach the threshold of bafflement or outright heresy, the writer brings us back to just enough of the human person to cling on to: 'give me a drink'; 'Jesus wept'.

John 14 negotiates this territory carefully. This is a God-perspective – Jesus explaining the nature of God's realm, 'heaven', to his followers. Unsurprisingly, they are troubled – this language, supposedly so comforting and peace-bringing, threatens to disturb them because it is so alien and peculiar. It asks the disciples to interrogate their own belief and convictions but these don't quite make it over the line where the description of God's purpose becomes clear to them.

The theological point though, is that the Father and the Son are different facets of the same Godhead. The disciples already stand in the presence of God; they don't have to do more work, believe more things or wrestle with history, culture or context. They just have to get the reality behind Jesus as the Son and God as the Father. This isn't exactly easy.

The beginning of John 14 starts at an end. The disciples are asked to believe in God and Jesus and this is significant because that command points us to the God-perspective. The 'I am' of Jesus is the 'I AM' of the God of Moses. This is God talking about God to people of limited understanding about their questions about who or what, are you? The end to which the disciples are directed in their imaginations is the Father's house, the dwelling place, which is filled with multiple possibilities. The image of the 'many mansions' is of a locus which yet has a place for all. Heaven is not a narrow set of options obtained by tests, but expansive, full of possibilities. The divine realm to which human beings are to be gathered, the trajectory to which they tend, is not random either, but prepared by God, a God who knows the secrets of all hearts. Jesus says, clearly, that this is a purpose of God who longs for the created to be drawn back to the creator: 'that where I am, there you may be also'. The God who exists in relationship with God's self, the Father and the Son, extends that relationship to human beings.

Jesus insists that the disciples know this about divine purpose, but the disciples push back against it, sensing perhaps that the God-perspective is beyond them, 'we do not know where you are going? How can we know (the way)?' They have, after all, their own tradition, expectations, history, theology and cultural memories. Who needs this other stuff?

Jesus then says that they do not have to imagine 'the way' for themselves or do extra work, or become more mentally acute to discern it. Instead, he says he satisfies all that they need. He is the 'way', 'the truth' and 'the life'. Their relationship with God is satisfied by their relationship with Jesus. All they have to do is follow. The burden is in fact, light.

But Jesus does not say no one comes to *God* except by him; only that no one comes to the *Father* except through him. To see into the mystery of the Fatherhood of God, that profound relationship which exemplifies the longing and desire of God for the creation, one also has to understand the

purpose and nature of the incarnate Son who is the promulgator of the God-perspective – *this* is how God sees things in the created order. In the face of the disciples' continuing bafflement, Jesus blurs the line between himself and the Godhead. Encounter with God is possible and enduring. Mystery can be entered without destruction. God is eternal and ineffable and also a first century Jew breaking bread at a table and talking about God's kingdom and a new reality beyond human life. It is supernatural and terrible and simultaneously personal and achievable. Jesus makes it easy when the way is to perceive the nature of Father-Son relationship in how we think about God, when we pray 'Our Father...'

Moreover, Jesus offers all this so that they will come to understand that they will not be alone and abandoned after his death. The relationship will continue. God does not intend that the creation should be plunged back into chaos and uncertainty. Because Jesus and the Father are one, the ending of his human life does not result in failure and despair. God is accessible, real, personally connected, active, longing and waiting. The disciples will understand this when they encounter the resurrected Jesus, but until that happens what Jesus says about his coming death appears to make little sense.

John 14.6 has often been used as an excuse to exclude people of other faiths or none from God's promises. The argument goes that Jesus names himself as the only gatekeeper to God's favour, the promise of heaven. Therefore, if a person is not a Christian, believing in the reality of Jesus, then that becomes an eternal stumbling block.

But this reading simply reflects human prejudice or perhaps, more kindly, concern for the eternal destiny of others, as well as perhaps a narrow understanding of 'truth'. It is notable that many parts of the global Christian world would never even think to frame these words in this 'you are in, you are out' way. And John's gospel does not ask us to read like this. We are to stand in the company of the disciples and *look around*. Here is a Rabbi with those he would teach. Here are disciples of the teacher straining to understand – theology is complex, all they really have to fall back on is the community of friendship and mutual support. There are things which are comfortable and familiar about being human, but also things which are frightening and confusing about how they are supposed to think. They are Jews who have inherited a Messiah tradition, but here is something much more radical. The Teacher is God-in relationship with God and therefore both a Rabbi and something Other, stranger and uncannier. It is God-perspective he offers and which their minds struggle with. They are, after all, only human, as all readers, performers and hearers of John's gospel are only human.

In fact, we could argue that John's gospel and indeed John 14 offer a much more inclusive picture. John's gospel says that it is ok to be baffled and confused by the mystery of God; God's realm is not exclusive or subject to a test of particular belief but filled with different and many prepared places because of the intimacy with which God knows us. In fact there are no special hoops to jump through, tests to pass or theological hurdles to be overcome: there is just God loving and longing for the creation. To see this more clearly *does* require some spiritual attention to one's own self, a re-orientation of life, way of living, purpose and intention – repentance and restarting the journey. One way of doing that is to be context-specific: a Rabbi with his disciples thinking about God in a new way as Father and Son together and intermingled – as a way of finding reassurance.

Non-Christians are most likely to encounter the words of John 14.6 at funerals, and do, most often, find them comforting, rather than excluding, a signpost to a promise that offers something as yet unimagined, but hopeful. Christians over-familiar with the words might forget the impact that words heard or read for the first time can have, especially perhaps in the context of faith-eluding grief. And

these words have power, invitation, and challenge and their deep structures are saturated with love and hopefulness. To this end, the narrative of Teacher and disciples in John 14.6 has power to touch the hearts of people who have no biblical knowledge or grounding in Christian faith, by offering something of the mystery of the loving God which can penetrate to the centre of what ails us in the face of loss.

Time and time again in John's gospel, this interface between human bafflement and God-perspective is laid out in terms of liberation, reassurance and inclusion. The woman at the well starts at the level of human thirst and mutual help and has her mind expanded to the God knowledge of her life and self, and the freedom of being known, loved, challenged and redeemed. A Samaritan, she is set upon the way, the truth and the life. Nicodemus, struggling with the idea of being born again is told to think of God-perspective – being born from above, given into life by a heavenly parent. He is set upon a new path as a new person. The obfuscation is part of the journey to spiritual clarity.

To this extent, it is necessary to resist the text, where the writer of John pulls us deeper and deeper into the 'truth' which is Jesus, because this is to pretend that we understand, when the God-perspective of the Gospel shows that we are incapable of understanding. We need to stand in solidarity with the woman at the well, Nicodemus, Peter, Thomas, Philip and finally Mary at the tomb. Mary's bafflement, confusion, fear and grief show that it is acceptable, even expected, not to recognise Jesus, but that the encounter happens anyway, for God calls us all by name. We need to drink the wine that was water before we ask what it means. Just as we need to eat the bread and drink the wine before we enter fully into the eucharistic mystery of what these things are in relation to the Body and Blood of Jesus. The theology of the God-perspective in John is not just an intellectual exercise, but a matter too of bodies, lives and practical action. When we do this, and ask reflective questions, we allow the Christological matters so beloved of commentators to interrogate our questions too. It is ok to be discombobulated by it all, to make mistakes, to believe the wrong things, to lose sight of God and to lose sight of the 'way', because, as John's gospel shows, Jesus, even if we do not know him or recognise him, has a habit of putting himself in *our* way. He happens along to a well, he appears in a garden, he turns himself into foot washing servant, a mysterious presence displaying his crucifixion wounds. He is not recognised at first, but then comes the revelation which confirms his promise that he *will* come for us; we are not left friendless and alone, excluded or condemned. Whether we saw him or not, or recognised him or not, he was there all along.

To this extent, to proclaim that Christ is only for Christians is to refuse the breath-taking audacity of the text's claim, which is that Christ as God only expands the horizons of the generosity of God for all. It is the disciples who demand proofs of God: show us the Father; let me handle your wounds. But the God perspective is different. Jesus encourages them to dig into the depths of their tradition, history and contemporary relationship with him to see more clearly what those signs are telling them. And in John, what wells up from that encounter with the deep structure of Jesus's ministry, the signs and actions, is the Comforter, the Spirit, God who goes with us and will never let us go.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going.' ⁵ Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶ Jesus said to him, 'I

am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

⁸ Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.'⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.