

BOOK REVIEW

Kasper Bro Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 93. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008). xiv + 266 pp. Hbk. €99.00/US\$147.00.

Larsen's closely-argued and illuminating study offers a prime example of how fuller knowledge of classical literature and its conventions can transform our understanding of New Testament documents. Many ancient readers would have known that the resolution of Homer's *Odyssey* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (two of the most important works in ancient Hellenistic literature) each hinges on a former servant's identification of the main character by means of healed scars (*Od.* 19.385-94; *Oed. tyr.* 950-1185). Aristotle in turn cites these particular scenes to highlight the importance of recognition as a literary device (*Poet.* 1452a-b; 1454b-55a). Even though key vocabulary [ἀναγνωρίσις/ἀναγνωρισίξειν] is absent, Jesus' disciples likewise recognize their Lord by his post-resurrection scars in both Lk. 24.39 and Jn 20.20. Whereas, theologically, Jesus' healed wounds demonstrate the transformation of suffering and the vindication of a rejected Messiah, in cultural terms their resemblance to a key feature of Hellenistic literary convention would surely have had significant apologetic currency in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Larsen's study addresses recognition as a literary type-scene only within John's Gospel. Chapter 1 first reviews Aristotle's treatment of anagnorisis, then discusses a range of related concerns (appearance vis-à-vis reality; misrepresentation and verification; perception and cognition; identity and disguise; belief vs. unbelief) in conversation with Greimas and Courtés, and as they apply in particular to the Johannine narrative. Larsen proposes his own typology of recognition, which distinguishes between 'showing', 'telling' and 'whispering', with the latter two distinguished by their communication to story characters and outside observers respectively. Reviewing a wide range of recognition scenes in ancient (including biblical) literature, he offers a five-part

taxonomy: meeting, resistance to recognition, the display of a token or sign, recognition proper and the attendant reaction. Larsen proposes that the recognition scene has three main functions, all of which are demonstrable in the Fourth Gospel: '(1) It is the primary narrative device, in which hidden identities come to light; (2) it negotiates social roles and thematizes social expulsion and integration; (3) it culminates in an event of instantaneous presence which eliminates the distance between recognizer and recognized' (p. 72).

The remaining chapters address particular sections of John's Gospel. 'Anagnorisis and Arrival (John 1–4)' accounts for the Johannine prologue as 'an act of *whispering*, by which the reader is given advance knowledge about the main character, who will appear later in the story' (p. 74). Specifically, readers are given to understand both the σάρξ and the δόξα of Jesus, whereas characters within the narrative are left to puzzle out the veracity of each aspect of his identity. Here, however, Larsen departs from his proposed model, since he argues that Jesus' 'disguise' or 'camouflage' (his appearance in human form) is not a deception but an aspect of his true identity. Similarly, Larsen's argument that the mark of the Spirit that enables John the Baptist's recognition of him is akin to a birthmark, 'a kind of congenital token...which Jesus possessed since the *archē* of his existence' (p. 100), runs counter to the clear sense of Jn 1.33. Nonetheless, his analysis is particularly insightful in identifying John the Baptist, the earliest disciples and various characters whom Jesus encounters (such as the woman at the well) as agents who thematize the dynamics of showing/seeing and telling/hearing that lead to belief and further testimony, and thus are critical to the reader's own experience of John's narrative. Equally helpful is his identification of the Johannine σημεῖα as 'recognition tokens' that function both within and beyond the world of the text. Throughout this chapter Larsen notes parallels to and departures from conventional recognition scenes in Hellenistic and biblical literature alike (of which he demonstrates an encyclopaedic knowledge).

Chapter 3, 'Recognition in Conflict (John 5–19)', proposes that recognition type-scenes in this section of John's Gospel focus primarily on 'cognitive resistance' to the identity of Jesus. Thus Jn 5:1-18 (the healing at the pool) 'is a recognition parody...a move from *agnoia* to an inadequate anagnorisis' (p. 147); Jesus' ἐγώ εἰμι sayings borrow 'the self-identification formula of the ancient anagnorisis scene' (p. 150); the episode of the man born blind entails a complex, multi-layered

series of primary and secondary recognitions; Jesus' exposure of Judas at the Last Supper amounts to a 'recognition' of each. In a number of scenes the theme of *non*-recognition is prominent. For instance, according to 'the conventions of the genre' Jesus' declaration of his own identity in Jn 18.5 would anticipate 'recognition of the observed's superior status, [but] no acknowledgement takes place here'; 'it ends as a non-recognition' (pp. 169-70). Likewise in his denial of Jesus, 'Peter reverses the typical self-identification formula of anagnorisis—he wants to stay incognito'; 'When breaking off at the move of token-display (the cock-crow), the scene becomes a torso, lacking the final moment of recognition and attendant reactions' (pp. 172-73). Recognition scenes typically occur at homecoming, the protagonist's point of origin, but not so in the case of Jesus; the Son presents his disciples to the Father as formal tokens of his accomplishment, but 'this is not a recognition token in the conventional sense' (pp. 181, 183). Such *departures* from the proposed model, however, pose a difficult challenge to the heuristic schema itself: at what point does one conclude that apparent similarities are at most thematic and general, rather than formal and (in the proper sense of the word) generic?

Finally, 'Recognition and Departure (John 20–21)' addresses the most widely-acknowledged recognition scenes in this Gospel: Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene, to the gathered disciples, and finally to Thomas, all of which are structured around the themes of seeing, telling and hearing. Particularly evocative here are Larsen's observations that recognition scenes in classical literature are frequently located in proximity to the hero's burial place, that 'The chase toward the locus of recognition is a topos in recognition scenes', and finally that 'Voice recognition is also a common motif in Greco-Roman literary anagnorises' (pp. 192-95, 201), since all three elements feature prominently in John.

At this point, questions of literary function come to the fore: according to Larsen, emphasis on telling and hearing at the climax of John's narrative makes this chapter 'the place where the text most clearly seeks to reach beyond its own story-world' (p. 190). By the same token (as it were), Jesus' blessing on those who believe without seeing (20.29) marks the final transition from story-world to the world of the reader: 'such believers are John's model readers' (p. 211). Larsen offers a finely nuanced analysis of the parallel interplay between eyewitnesses and observers within and outside the text, concluding that

the evangelist's 'ability to lead away attention from the relation between narrator and narratee toward a story-world of its own is probably one of the narrative's key generators of persuasive power' (p. 215). Yet notwithstanding a brief footnote reference to the nature of reading in antiquity (p. 213 n. 58), ambiguity remains as to the identity and role of the implied audience and/or readership, given relatively low rates of literacy in the Hellenistic world (according to Harris, between 10% and 15% for men; less than 5% for women).¹ The former would have indeed experienced John's narrative (and Jesus) via telling and hearing, but the latter group would also have encountered Jesus as a form of *seeing*—albeit in mediated fashion by means of a (sacred) text, all the more so since, as Larsen himself observes, 'John...explicitly seeks to absorb the reader into the world of seeing' (p. 215).

Larsen makes apparently contradictory statements concerning the function of the text. In the introduction, he explicitly demurs with regard both to authorial intent and to audience perception:

it is beyond the limits of the present study to determine whether the author(s) of the Fourth Gospel deliberately intended to employ and transform the conventional recognition type-scene of the time... Likewise, we cannot demonstrate to what extent the gospel's intended audience was aware of the play on already established genres in the text (p. 19).

Yet elsewhere the study consistently indicates a high degree of intentionality: 'anagnorisis permeates the plot not only as a metaphoric trope concerning epistemological questions but as a type-scene reflecting contemporary genre conventions... It thus formed part of the ancient reader's horizon of literary expectations' (p. 90); 'John goes along with these genre conventions in the main part of the scene' (p. 198); 'This way of putting recognition into practice [is] turned into a veritable program through a conspicuous transformation of the genre' (p. 204), etc.

The inference, in any event, is that John serves a strongly apologetic purpose—which raises four additional observations. First, Larsen briefly describes (but does little to exploit) what is undoubtedly the clearest piece of ancient evidence in support of his interpretation: the

1. William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 248-84, 328-30.

collation and expansion in the second-century *Epistula Apostolorum* of resurrection appearances from Luke and John in the form of recognition scenes (pp. 185-86). To this we might add, incidentally, MacDonald's citation of Nonnos of Panopolis in the early fifth century.² Along the same lines, secondly, the study would benefit from a further exploration of the implied purpose or function of John's Gospel in relation to its *Rezeptionsgeschichte* or (to use Ulrich Luz's term) *Wirkungsgeschichte*. But, thirdly, the broader theological implications of the proposed parallels also remain unexplored. Does the appropriation of literary conventions from the foundational μύθοι of Hellenistic culture imply that the Johannine Gospel is similarly 'mythic', or are such adaptations ideologically neutral? Finally, Larsen's contention that Jn 20.29-31 ultimately transcends and transforms the conventions of the genre deserves additional discussion. He argues that the transition from seeing to telling and hearing is necessary because of Jesus' physical absence from the post-resurrection church. Yet New Testament literature is elsewhere replete with assertions that the risen Lord indeed remains with his followers (and Luke in particular implies that 'recognition' of Christ takes place as the community breaks bread in his memory; so Lk. 24.31, καὶ ἐπέγνωσαν αὐτόν). Even if that is deemed irrelevant for Johannine theology, the ongoing presence and teaching of Jesus are mediated in this Gospel less via testimony and anagnorisis on the part of subsequent readers than by the agency of the παράκλητος, 'the Holy Spirit' (14.26) who, says Jesus, 'will testify on my behalf' (15.26).

Larsen offers a challenging, erudite and provocative exploration of John's rhetorical and apologetic strategies against the backdrop of Hellenistic literary convention. It is elegantly written and almost free of typographical errors, both of which are real benefits given the density of the argument. A significant contribution to the cultural contextualization of John, this study will be most appreciated by advanced students or specialists in Johannine theology, classical literature and literary theory.

Michael P. Knowles
McMaster Divinity College

2. Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 117 and n. 26 [PG 43.913].