Is There Anything Left to be Told About John?
The Future of Johannine Character Studies and the Literary Concept of Bildung

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, the author suggests that Johannine scholarship can be enriched in the future with the contribution of scholars from different parts of the world, sometimes even from areas where Johannine scholarship does not have a long tradition. He also briefly advances a new approach to character studies in the Fourth Gospel, emphasizing the possibility of engaging the modern literary genre of Bildung/Bildungsroman in the study of the gospel narratives, succinctly arguing for the legitimacy of his approach.

KEY WORDS: Fourth Gospel, characters, Bildung, Bildungsroman, novel.

During my Seminary years, I was encouraged by my professors to pursue an academic career in Johannine studies. The main reason was the fact that one could hardly find a New Testament scholar primarily focused on the Johannine track in the (Evangelical) Romanian theological context. I began to read John’s Gospel with a higher level of interest than before. When the time to write my BA thesis came, I tried to find a subject that could be both scholarly and original. I decided to write on “The Theology of Exodus in the Fourth Gospel.” I thought that my findings on Exodus in John were notable breakthroughs in Johannine scholarship. Little did I know at the beginning of my research that a considerable amount of material had been produced on the matter (not just for John’s Gospel, \(^1\) but
for all the other canonical gospels and that the Exodus/new Exodus theme was followed by many in different books of the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament.)

Virtually the same situation occurred while writing my MTh dissertation, again in Johannine studies. I considered, probably inspired by one of Richard Bauckham’s works, that a research in the politics of John’s Gospel would be at least scholarly engaging if not somehow original. While completing my dissertation with the title “Towards a Political Theology of John’s Gospel” I understood that I was mistaken again.

One of my main issues was that in Romania, in a sense, all theology, besides Eastern–Orthodox theology (with its most influential theologian, the late Father Professor Dumitru Stăniloae, an acclaimed scholar in church dogmatics) can be considered in its adolescence, struggling to recover after a half of century of communism. Another issue is the fact that Eastern–Orthodox theologians, who represent the majority, are not very fond of biblical studies. So, Romanian theology really does not have a tradition in biblical research (besides occasional theologians that emerge from the Protestant tradition, such as Reverend Professor Hans Klein and sometimes from the Orthodox), though Evangelical theologians are struggling to raise an interest in this matter for the past three decades. But the main problem that any biblical student, researcher or scholar is facing in Romania is the lack of resources. Besides the rather small libraries held by the Seminaries of different Evangelical denominations (displaying on average 20000 volumes each), the library of a center for contemporary Christian education and culture (displaying around 38000 volumes) and the library of a private Evangelical Christian university (displaying over 60000 volumes), there is hardly any accomplished library for those who seek to do research in biblical studies. One must rely on resources that can be found abroad.

Hoping to avoid past experiences regarding writing a final thesis or dissertation, during the research for my doctoral degree (at the Baptist Theological Faculty, University of Bucharest), I managed to gather a considerable amount of resources in order to be able to produce a proper doctoral thesis. My periods of research in
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Cambridge (2012) and Oxford (2013–2014, as an academic visitor) proved to be very fruitful. But during all this time, I could not get myself free of a thought which a very good friend of mine and mentor shared once with me. When he understood that I was set on following the Johannine track he kindly asked me: “Is there anything left to be told about John?” (implying that there is already vast scholarship on John’s Gospel). Ironically enough, he is an Old Testament scholar. I thought that I would fail again to produce something original from John. But while reading the Fourth Gospel, I suddenly noticed some details that could bring something forth, something I considered to be worth mentioning.

I realized that besides Jesus, who is undoubtedly the main character of the Fourth Gospel, as Culpepper correctly states, and, I must add, of any gospel, there are two very important figures that emerge through the gospel’s narrative: Peter and the Beloved Disciple. I also noticed that the way in which the fourth evangelist ends his account is meant to bring for the last time the above mentioned characters into the spotlight. Bultmann skilfully emphasizes the role of the two disciples in chapter 21, arguing for a “motif of Peter and the beloved disciple.” T. Cottam also believes that the ending of the gospel tries to balance the narrative in which Peter denies Jesus, but also tries to dismiss a rumor regarding the Beloved Disciple. Blomberg carries the observations regarding the two even further. He believes that chapter 21 was added after Peter’s death or possibly after the death of the Beloved Disciple. This is a very significant conclusion because it shows the prominent roles of the two disciples for the Christian community that were familiar with the gospel’s account and also the preeminent roles of the two for the primitive Christian community in Jerusalem. Blomberg is not the only one to observe that the last chapter of the Fourth Gospel is important because of Peter and the Beloved Disciple. D. A. Carson also states:

True, John 20:30–31 is the climax of the book, the ‘conclusion’ in that sense. But as in a ‘whodunit’ where all the pieces have finally come together in a magnificent act of disclosure, there remains certain authorial discretion: the book may
end abruptly with the act of disclosure, the solution to the mystery, or it may wind down through a postscript that tells what happens to the characters, especially if what happens to them sheds a certain light backward onto the principal plot of the work.\textsuperscript{16}

Based on these observations, I understood that at least the ending of the Fourth Gospel is about the outcome of the discipleship process of Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Also, the circular shape of the gospel, with Simon Peter’s calling to follow Jesus at the beginning and a similar calling at the end reassured me that the observation was not misleading.\textsuperscript{17} But these considerations seemed not to be sufficient to develop a thesis focused on character studies in the Fourth Gospel, especially in the context in which this topic has been of major interest in Johannine studies for the past 30 years,\textsuperscript{18} starting with Culpepper’s work (\textit{Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel}) and even before that.\textsuperscript{19} Some scholars were interested in characters based on gender considerations;\textsuperscript{20} others were concerned with the anonymous characters,\textsuperscript{21} characters defined by ambiguity,\textsuperscript{22} minor characters\textsuperscript{23} or non Jewish characters present in the narratives of the Fourth Gospel.\textsuperscript{24} In the same time some manifested interest for individual characters (the mother of Jesus,\textsuperscript{25} Nicodemus,\textsuperscript{26} the woman at the well,\textsuperscript{27} Moses,\textsuperscript{28} Judas,\textsuperscript{29} the Jews,\textsuperscript{30} Martha and Mary,\textsuperscript{31} Lazarus,\textsuperscript{32} Mary Magdalene,\textsuperscript{33} Thomas,\textsuperscript{34} Jesus\textsuperscript{35} – and Logos\textsuperscript{36} – and God\textsuperscript{37}), and others showed interest for characters in tandem\textsuperscript{38} or for the relationship between certain characters.\textsuperscript{39} There are some works concerned with Peter’s portrayal\textsuperscript{40} and the portrayal of the Beloved Disciple\textsuperscript{41} and even the portrayal of the two together.\textsuperscript{42}

Like others, I became interested in the portrayals of Peter and the Beloved Disciple in the Fourth Gospel. But the same issue occurred. Is there anything left to be told about these characters in John? Then “the coin dropped.” I recalled studying years ago about a modern literary concept that seemed to gather the details about the two disciples which I noticed in the Fourth Gospel. The concept I will be referring to is \textit{Bildung} or \textit{Bildungsroman}. The term is of German provenance and basically means “formation novel”, referring to the development of the hero or the main character of the novel.\textsuperscript{33}
Based on the way in which the image of a hero can be built, the novels can be classified as follows: a journey novel, a testing novel, a biographic or autobiographic novel and a *Bildungsroman*. Starting from the meaning of *Bildung*, R. P. Shaffner advances the idea of an ‘apprenticeship’ type of novel.

Manfred Engel emphasizes a certain ambiguity of the term *Bildungsroman*, though it belongs to the tried and tested tools of literary criticism, there seems to be little consensus on its exact meaning. There are probably two reasons for this state of matters: the anachronistic origin of the term and its successful globalization. Most researches in the field agree that this genre appeared in German literature towards the end of the XVIII\textsuperscript{th} century with Christoph Martin Wieland’s *Deschichte des Aghaton* in 1766–1767, Karl Philipp Moritz’s *Anton Reiser* in 1785–1790, as the first example of negative *Bildungsroman*, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* in 1795–1796, as the seminal model of the genre. The term which adequately describes this type of novel would be created by Karl Morgenstern in 1810, using it for the first time in one of his lectures at the University of Tartu. Unfortunately his essays and lectures on the genre were little read and so his contribution was soon forgotten. Based on R. P. Shaffner’s research it seems that the concept of *Bildungsroman* was already defined by Friedrich von Blankenburg towards the end of the XVIII\textsuperscript{th} century (in 1774) in his *Versuch über den Roman*. The term *Bildungsroman* was re-invented after a century from the above mentioned novels by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey at the University of Berlin, who will use the term in *Das Leben Schleiermachers* in 1870. Yet the term didn’t receive a broader reception until 1905 with the collection of essays *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*.

According to Dithley, in a *Bildungsroman* the author follows the progress of a young man in his struggle to understand himself, find his identity and establish his role and responsibility in society. Based on this view, a *Bildungsroman* has a universality which an autobiography doesn’t have. The former follows a representative young man, who eventually becomes a type, and his experiences become symbols.
But what is a *Bildungsroman* after all? The term received the following definition in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*: “a kind of novel that follows the development of the hero from childhood or adolescence to adulthood, through a trouble quest for identity.”

Another definition is given by *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*: “this is a term more or less synonymous with *Erziehungsroman*—literally an upbringing or education novel. . . Widely used by German critics, it refers to a novel which is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine (usually the former.) It describes the process by which maturity is achieved by through the various ups and downs of life.”

It seemed that Peter and the Beloved Disciple fit in the generous limits of the *Bildung/Bildungsroman* genre. But is it safe to mingle with a modern literary concept, when in fact we are dealing with the ancient text of the Fourth Gospel and its characters? The main inconvenience is probably in the largely spread understanding among scholars that ancient literary characters are quite different from the modern ones. This objection is due to the noticeable difference in which a character is understood in the Mediterranean ancient literature and the European modern literature. Ancient characters are viewed merely as types, while modern characters are expected to show noticeable psychological development. But one should be aware, as S. P. Roth points out, that the difference between ancient and modern characterization is one of kind, and not one of quality. Despite these observations, some scholars seemed to identify the *Bildung/Bildungsroman* genre in different Bible narratives.

Professor J. Barton, considering J. Miles’ proposal that the Old Testament should be regarded as a novel with a single plot and with a progressive portrayal of its main character, God, suggested that the entire Old Testament could be viewed as a *Bildungsroman*. This kind of observation encourages the Bible reader to identify without much difficulty numerous narratives which reflect the *Bildung/Bildungsroman* genre. For example in the Pentateuch: the life of Joseph, but also the life of Jacob, the life of Moses, the life of Joshua; or outside the Pentateuch: Samson, Samuel, and David, even Esther or Job, and probably Daniel too. All these stories
with their main protagonists reveal more or less specific elements of a Bildungsroman.

Interestingly, R. Romøren argues that the intrinsic model of Bildungsroman has in fact a biblical origin:

All histories become narratives in one way or another, and in this case the narrative conforms to the pattern of Bildungsroman, with its narrative structure Home-Departure-Adventure and Trials-Homecoming. The important part here is the idea of the return home, which I regard as a pre-modern and religious concept of story, with roots going back to the Bible (The Prodigal Son).64

Again, the element emphasized by Romøren, “the return home”, can be easily found in the last episode of the Fourth Gospel, especially in Peter’s case. For Simon Peter this is not just the moment of returning home, but the moment when he reaches his maturity after important trials and hardship. A. J. Köstenberger reaches similar conclusions in a discussion regarding the mission of Jesus’ disciples. He states that the development of Peter and the Beloved Disciple is followed through the gospel narratives culminating with the scene from 21:15–23. Moreover, the relationship between the two disciples provides a coherent perspective for the entire gospel.65

Being aware of the popularity and the realism which are characterizing the Bildung genre and also acknowledging the fact that “the term Bildungsroman has enormous range and applicability,”66 I decided to write a doctoral thesis with the title: “An Ancient Bildung Based on Pentateuch Narratives. The Portrait of Peter and of the Beloved Disciple in the Fourth Gospel.” Though a Bildungsroman is interested in just one character, I realized that, in a sense, Peter and the Beloved Disciple are inseparable and they are brought forth together in major moments of the plot (see John 13, probably 18, 20, 21).67

Everything seemed safe enough in terms of research until I encountered some of R. R. Beck’s observations in the context of a rather brief interaction he had with the Bildungsroman genre. Referring to the way in which a modern reader approaches an
ancient text, Beck believes that the reader needs a tool of control to be assisted by while aiming to understand the ancient text, because he naturally approaches the text using a genre more familiar to him. This tool of control is in fact the ancient genre which characterizes the text itself. He also specifies that the first century genres act as second–order controls, because we primarily tend to read the text in our own terms, appealing to the genres which are culturally and temporarily closer to us. If used properly, the second–order controls might rule out some current options, offering as an example the Bildungsroman, because this genre is lacking in early precedents, adding that this is not the case of biography. At the same time, ancient genres might suggest modern analogues.  

Though Beck’s observations prove to be pertinent, they could be somehow refined. It is true that historically, the Bildungsroman lacks early precedents, but it might have considerable aesthetic and conceptual precedents as already briefly shown above. An ancient text, like Mark’s Gospel to which Beck was referring to, or like John’s Gospel, can display characteristics specific to the Bildungsroman genre, despite the ancient author’s independence in relation to the history of the modern genre itself. So to speak, Beck’s conclusion is not definitive, because even the romantic novelists who created Bildungsromane have done this before the time when a proper terminology to describe the phenomena would appear.

At the same time, there is the other side of the discussion. B. Hochman, for example, is aware of the differences between ancient and modern literature in different ways (to indicate just one, the way in which the person is understood), but at the end, as modern readers, he argues that “we have no alternative but to construct our images of character in terms of our knowledge and experience.” M. Stibbe is even more specific, saying that one can use “the techniques associated with characterization in the modern novel”, while approaching the characters of the Fourth Gospel.

I would like to advance, in sense, a slightly new approach in Johannine character studies. Probably it could be beneficial to give the modern reader more credit and more independence while approaching the ancient text of gospel, especially in the context of the discussion about Bildung and the characters of the Fourth Gospel.
Using “second-order controls” – to make use of Beck’s phrase – is scholarly sane, but what if we try to approach the text in a more appealing fashion to the modern reader? Instead of dismissing the Bildungsroman because of its presupposed lack of precedents, one could benefit from the aesthetics of a very common genre even for the Bible narratives.

Being aware of the fact that my intervention merely scratches the surface of the discussion advertised in the title of my paper, I would like to add at the end that besides the lack of resource in some parts of the world and the scholarly abundance in other parts, it seems that Johannine scholarship is still flourishing and continually gathering new topics in its swirl. So there is still plenty left to be told about John.

NOTES


9 As Trine Stauning Willert asserts, referring to Greek Orthodox theology, "the preference given to patristic studies has resulted in a poor contemporary tradition of biblical studies." *New Voices in Greek Orthodox Thought. Untying the bond between Nation and Religion* (Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies Series; Surrey, UK/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014),
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67.


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28 Harstine, Moses as a Character in the Fourth Gospel.


Johannevangelium (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).


44 Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, Speech, Genre and other Late Essays (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2004), 10.


47 Engel, “Variants of the Romantic ‘Bildungsroman’”.


51 G Summerfield & L. Downward observe that for some Bildungsroman critiques society is receptive for male development alone. New Perspectives..., 170.

52 Summerfield & Downward, New Perspectives..., 1.


55 As Bennema points out, scholars did not reach a consensus regarding the differences between ancient and modern characterization techniques and if they could be used simultaneously. Bennema, Encountering Jesus, 11.

56 “The difference has to do with the distinction between characterization that is representational and characterization that is illustrative, a distinction that


60 Professor Robert P. Gordon considers that the narrative known as the ‘History of David’s Rise from 2 Samuel 24–26 “merits the description as a Bildungsroman.” Hebrew Bible and Ancient Versions (Society for the Old Testament Study Series; Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), xx. In the same order of ideas R. Alter notices that Shakespeare was able “to invent a kind of Bildungsroman for the young Prince Hal” (the young king Henry the Vth), starting with a series of hints of historical tradition, and a similar method can be identified in the portrayal of King David too. Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 40–41.


62 Carl A. Newson argues that the Book of Job can be seen as a kind of Bildungsroman for the reader’s moral imagination.” The Book of Job; A Contest of Moral Imagination (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17–21.


67 It is not uncommon to study characters in tandem. For example see Beirne, Women and Men.

68 Robert R. Beck, Nonviolent Story: Narrative Conflict Resolution in the

69 Engel, „Bildungssroman,” 264.


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