

WILLIS HEDLEY SALIER

The Rhetorical Impact of the Sēmeia in the Gospel of John

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Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

This study seeks to provide a richer, more integrated perspective on the σημεῖα as they function within the final form of the Fourth Gospel. Previous research has discussed in detail an alleged ‘signs source’ and given less attention to the function of the σημεῖα within the Fourth Gospel’s rhetorical purpose. In particular, little account has been taken of how the σημεῖα would have been received by the Gospel’s early audience.

The investigation proceeds via two complementary angles of inquiry. The first angle moves outwards from the text to the early audience of the Gospel, asking how the text impacts upon the reader with respect to the general references to σημεῖα, and also the detail of the particular σημεῖα narratives. The second angle moves inwards from the early audience to the text. This is achieved via a socio-historical investigation that draws on vocabulary and situations presented in the Gospel and asks how an early audience, broadly conceived, might have received the σημεῖα language and narratives. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the Johannine conversation by illustrating further the narrative artistry of the Gospel, helping its modern readers to better appreciate its impact in its initial context, and highlighting further facets of the portrait of Jesus contained within its pages.

This book is a lightly revised version of a doctoral thesis submitted to Cambridge University in 2003. Gratitude must be expressed to Mohr Siebeck Publishing House for accepting this work and their efficiency in giving the guidance necessary to bring it to print. I would also like to thank Prof. Dr. Jörg Frey and Dr. Henning Ziebritzki for their valuable recommendations and advice during the process.

Over the course of the three or so years that it took to produce the initial work one accumulates an almost incalculable list of those who ought to be acknowledged and thanked. Sue and I are extremely grateful to the Lord for his abundant provision through so many people and in so many ways. Throughout the process of research and writing Prof. Graham Stanton provided wise supervision, skilfully blurring the lines between professional attention to task and personal care and interest. I am also thankful to the examiners of the thesis, Dr. Andrew Lincoln and Dr. James Carleton Paget, for their incisive evaluation of my work and their stimulating comments, which still provide cause for reflection on the issues that I have attempted to explore.

For the necessities of life (and some of the luxuries) we owe thanks to many people and organisations: the Moore College Council, the Joan Augusta

McKenzie Travelling Scholarship, the Sydney Diocese Educational and Book Committee, St Edmund's College Tutorial Committee, Cambridge University Faculty of Divinity (German Fund), St Martin's Church, Kensington NSW, St Edmund's College Commonwealth and Overseas Studentship provided scholarships and timely grants. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Vanda and Debbie Gould for their financial and spiritual support over many years. The Millard family also proved to be a 'home away from home away from home' on more than one occasion. Many other individuals, too numerous to name, have been generous to a fault.

We are grateful for the vast crowd of family, friends and colleagues who have prayed, read our interminable emails and letters, and encouraged us through visits and correspondence. My own family have always been enthusiastic in their support, even if at times they may have wondered about it all. Unfortunately my father will never get to read the finished product but he always thought that I could do it; and I think in the end he understood why I was doing it. His memory is dear.

The congregation at St Andrews the Great were a constant source of encouragement. The preaching and general ministry there kept our priorities where they ought to be. The girls were happy at school so that meant we were happy at home. The Janis provided transport for a year, incentives to both run and pray, while I am especially thankful to Fiona for taking on the arduous task of reading and attempting to correct my impoverished colonial expression! Sandra den Otter and Simon Moore were also extremely generous with both time and comments in this regard. The Waldocks also provided support and friendship in so many ways not the least being a family during the final Christmas. Our other 'congregation', the staff, and scholars (and their partners) at Tyndale House, under the wise leadership of Bruce Winter were a rich source of friendship and stimulation.

Much has happened (both good and bad) to my family, friends and country during the time it took to complete this dissertation. It was some great relief in the midst of all this to be studying the Fourth Gospel and be constantly reminded of the testimony to the Lord Jesus that John has recorded. He urges us to believe in Jesus, who is both able and willing to make good the most marvellous promises concerning eternal life. At times the grip on those promises was a little slippery but thankfully the Lord has a stronger grip than I do. To him be the glory.

During this time my wife, Sue, and daughters, Talitha and Anna, were my constant companions. They were unfailingly positive when it mattered. To them this work is finally dedicated for their patience and love in bearing with a husband and father who is always (it seems) 'just going to his desk for a while'.

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Chapter 1

Reading the Signs

This study examines the language of σημεῖον in the Fourth Gospel with special attention to its function in the Gospel's narrative and rhetorical strategy. The topic has a pivotal importance in Johannine studies. The prominence and importance of the term σημεῖον in the presentation of the Fourth Gospel is clear¹ and an understanding of the term is one of the keys to understanding the Gospel itself.² The reasons for this prominence in the Fourth Gospel remain elusive despite numerous studies devoted to various aspects of its use and meaning.

The approach adopted in this study integrates areas covered by previous examinations of the σημεῖον material with a view to elucidating the rhetorical impact of the term itself and the narratives it denotes. Examination of the biblical materials moves among the poles of author, text and reader. Most studies tend to focus on one or other of these poles. The question of the rhetorical strategy of the Fourth Gospel demands that a more even account be given. The quest is for the nature of the inter-relationships between the three, asking how the author connects with his audience via the text to achieve his stated purposes. In the light of this dynamic the questions are posed afresh: Why has this term σημεῖον been chosen? How does it operate within the rhetorical strategy of the Fourth Gospel?

1.1 Previous Studies

Much research on the signs has been conducted under the dominant paradigm of the search for the putative signs source of the Gospel. This was most famously promulgated by Rudolf Bultmann in his commentary.³ Bultmann proposed that the source presented a popular Christology, in which Jesus is

¹ This is signalled by the presence of the term in two major summary statements in the Gospel: 12.37; 20.30.

² Nicol 1972: 1. Cf. Riga (1963: 402), 'Perhaps no single word can give such a profound insight into the whole theology of the Fourth Gospel as the word *semeion*.'

³ Bultmann (1971: 113) noted the previous efforts of Faure, Wellhausen, Spitta and Meyer. For a detailed history of the development of thinking concerning the signs source as well as accompanying criticism see van Belle 1994.

regarded as a Hellenistic 'theios aner' because of his miracles. The author of the Gospel⁴ deliberately sets this against his own deeper and more accurate Christology of Jesus as the Word of God who confronts mankind with the basic questions of existence. While the Hellenistic elements and possible gnostic influences of Bultmann's reconstruction have been all but repudiated, the search for the signs source has continued unabated to the present day. The work of Robert Fortna provides, arguably, the most complete account of the signs source.⁵

The most recent summary and critique of this thoroughly worked debate is to be found in a monograph by Gilbert van Belle.⁶ Van Belle offers a comprehensive analysis of the major players in the debate and concludes with a detailed criticism. Differences in elaboration of the content of the source, overly subjective criteria for distinguishing between Johannine and non-Johannine elements, lack of unanimity as to date, origin, *Sitz im Leben* are a few of the areas covered. The most damaging evidence comes in an examination of the stylistic criteria employed to discern the signs source. Van Belle collates and compares the results of numerous studies of Johannine style and demonstrates clearly that Johannine style characteristics are 'nearly evenly distributed throughout the gospel and that they offer no evidence for source reconstructions'.⁷ While there are still defenders of the signs source, the tide appears to be turning towards an appreciation of the difficulty of delineating its parameters, even if it is conceded to exist.⁸ And, even if the source did exist, the question still remains as to why the *source* found σημεῖον to be a useful term and why John saw this as a useful term to adopt and use in his Gospel.

A small number of studies on the signs have approached the question from outside the perspective of the signs source. Four will be briefly mentioned. Sebald Hofbeck's concern was to explain the origin of the use of σημεῖον apart from source theories.⁹ This origin was instead located in John's Jewish sensibility concerning the action of God in history, as expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures. Hofbeck suggested that the symbol-laden potential of the use of the expression by the prophets was creatively appropriated, and reflected upon in the light of the incarnation.¹⁰ Hofbeck was chiefly interested

⁴ Henceforth referred to as John. The precise identity of the author is not relevant to a study of his achievement in this text.

⁵ Fortna 1988.

⁶ Van Belle 1994.

⁷ Van Belle 1994: 373. An appendix to his work on pp. 405–17 lists these characteristics.

⁸ Cf. comments of Kysar (1999: 40), '(the) argument that source criticism is not a profitable enterprise in Johannine studies...is precisely right'.

⁹ Hofbeck 1970.

¹⁰ Hofbeck (1970: 205–12).

in the conceptual and theological origins of the term and took little account of relationships with the original audience of the text.

The search for the origins of the use of the term has been further pursued in the Hebrew Scriptures, in a series of shorter studies, with various combinations of exodus motifs, prophetic usage, wisdom motifs, and even the psalms mentioned.¹¹ The Hebrew Scriptures are the appropriate place to look for the origin of the usage in terms of its conceptual background.¹² However, it is suggested that the usage and impact of the term is better explained as a total function of the interaction between this conceptual background, the audience, and the fabric of the narrative in which the interaction takes place. This is to be explored in the course of this work.

Wolfgang Bittner explicitly critiqued signs source theories and pointed out, correctly, that a preoccupation with such theories had displaced the important question of the meaning and function of the term σημεῖον.¹³ His study sought to redress this and set out to investigate the relationship between signs and faith in the Fourth Gospel as well as the testimony of the signs to the messianic status of Jesus. His persuasive presentation demonstrated a consistently positive relationship between signs and faith in the Gospel. That is, that the signs are recorded with the express intention of leading the reader to faith and that faith based on signs is not an inferior expression of faith. He further suggested that the roots of the terminology lay in the messianic thought of Isaiah.¹⁴ While his study deals with the final form of the text and eschews any search for sources, it is more theological in its emphasis. No attention is paid to issues of audience reception. This study seeks to integrate the discussion of the sign language and narratives into the wider literary themes and thrust of the Gospel as well as take greater account of the rhetorical impact of the language and narratives on the early audience.

The move to a more literary approach to the biblical texts was taken up in Johannine studies with the publication of Culpepper's study in 1983.¹⁵ This approach emphasises the final form of the texts and employs methods more at home in the literary world of narratology. Since 1983 there have been an increasing number of studies adopting this broad approach and focussing on various aspects of the Gospel's 'narrative art'. However, comparatively few

¹¹ See for example, Schnackenburg (1968: 515–28); Clark (1983); Kiley (1988); Johns and Miller (1994: 526–7); Köstenberger, (1995: 90–92).

¹² Especially with the increasing recognition of the importance of the Hebrew Scriptures generally for the Fourth Gospel. See, amongst others, Barrett (1947), R.H. Smith (1962); Brown (1968: lix–lxi); Hanson (1991). Hofbeck also effectively critiques other alternatives such as the thought of Philo and the Qumran community (pp. 199–202).

¹³ Bittner 1987: 14–16

¹⁴ Bittner 1987: 146–50, 245–8.

¹⁵ Culpepper 1983.

have investigated the language of σημεῖον at any sort of length and depth.¹⁶ Christian Welck's recent study of the signs is one that purports to do this.¹⁷ He critiques previous attempts to isolate the sources of the Gospel and suggests that a narrative approach will avoid the problem of isolating the signs from their context, meaning that they can be seen as an integrated part of the Gospel's presentation.¹⁸ He proposes that the evangelist has combined historical narrative with apocalyptic to create a new literary form in order to communicate the eschatological dimension of Jesus' miracles.¹⁹ The miracle form found in the Gospel, designated as a σημεῖον, is the result. The signs are not merely miracles performed by Jesus during his earthly ministry but also literary entities designed to elicit faith in the Gospel's readers.²⁰ While Welck's study is a synchronic reading in that it focuses upon the final form of the text, it is not an entirely satisfactory literary reading in that little attention is paid to matters such as plot, character and theme. In effect, it is a form-critical study. The observation that this form was created to encompass both historical narrative and apocalyptic revelation is stimulating but the form itself is very general (person's need—narration of miracle—need has been met through the miracle—reactions to the miracle). Welck also concedes that the form is not consistently applied by the evangelist because of his desire to provoke his readers.²¹ The nature of the audience of the Gospel and possible reception of the narrated signs is not discussed. His rigidly applied synchronic perspective also means that issues of Jewish messianic expectations and the understanding of the signs in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures are not explored. This is despite the fact that elements in the text would appear to invite this kind of examination. Such observations point to the limitations of a purely synchronic literary analysis. As helpful as such an analysis might prove to be, attention needs to be paid to the text, cotext and context for a complete analysis to be made of the rhetorical impact.²² This inevitably leads to consideration of historical and background issues as well as a consideration of the cultural context into which the Gospel was originally communicated

Michael Labahn's concern is to provide an exhaustive account of the miracle narratives of the Gospel with a view to tracing the history of the traditions that lie behind the narratives as well as seeing how the redaction of

¹⁶ Johns and Miller (1994: 520–21 n.6) remark on this apparent lack.

¹⁷ Welck 1994.

¹⁸ Welck 1994: 41–48.

¹⁹ Welck: 1994: 236–9.

²⁰ Welck 1994: 289–93.

²¹ Welck 1994: 253–4. Cf. criticisms by Labahn (1999b: 186) who points to the flexibility of form in the miracle stories.

²² Cotterell and Turner (1986: 16) use these terms. The text is the actual words used; the cotext is the surrounding sentences, paragraphs and chapters; and the context is the sociological and historical setting of the text.

the narratives serves a new purpose within the context of the Gospel as it is received.²³ He points to the variety of different literary techniques that the evangelist uses in taking up the miracle traditions.²⁴ Different literary situations are created that serve different aims within the narrative as a whole. Various relationships with the formal structure of the tradition are discerned but overall Labahn suggests that the literary creativity serves a consistent hermeneutical strategy. This strategy is to bring the readers/hearers into contact with the narrated Jesus and therefore the life that he will bring according to the Father's will.²⁵ In the course of his excavation of the miracle traditions he broadens the discussion to consider the origins of features of the miracle narratives and in doing so begins to take in features of the broader cultural context. This thesis seeks to supplement his comprehensive analysis by locating the sign narratives within the more general context of the σημεῖον language used in the Gospel,²⁶ and considering the possible reception of this language and the narratives by the early audience of the Gospel.²⁷

1.2 The Present Study

It is suggested, then, that there is room for a study of the signs in the Fourth Gospel that focuses on the rhetorical function and early reception of both the language of σημεῖον generally and, more specifically, the σημεῖα narratives in the Fourth Gospel. This study enters the continuing conversation in Johannine studies concerning the language of σημεῖον by focussing on the usage in the final form of the Gospel's narrative. The intention is to apply more thoroughly the insights of narrative criticism and also a 'conservative reader response'²⁸ approach to the sign language and narratives of the Fourth Gospel in a way that takes particular account of the possible early audience reception of the Gospel. In short, the focus will be on the story and the

²³ Labahn 1999a; 1999b.

²⁴ Labahn (1999b) provides a concise summary of some of the major findings of his more detailed work.

²⁵ Labahn 1999a: 501.

²⁶ Labahn's focus is on what he sees as the redaction of the miracle tradition and so he concentrates solely on the sign narratives.

²⁷ Labahn also works very much within the community model that is a dominant feature of Johannine scholarship (Cf 1999a: 466-72). This leads him to engage conflict models within the 'Johannine community' (30-33) and also, in an attenuated way, between the community and the synagogue (pp. 34-41). This study seeks to think about the issue of audience more broadly.

²⁸ Vanhoozer 1995: 306-7.

reader.²⁹ This will produce an account that better integrates the meaning of the sign language and the narratives this term designates into the wider themes and concerns of the Gospel itself as well as elucidating the rhetorical impact in its original cultural context.

In order to broach the interface between text and the early readers two complementary directions of inquiry will be undertaken.³⁰ The first direction moves outwards from the text to the reader. In examining this perspective on the sign language and narratives, the control of the reading experience is given to the text.³¹ The analysis in this instance seeks to identify and explain the devices used in the text to produce the desired effect in the reader. The usual figure adduced at this point is that of the implied reader. This reader consists of 'the textual elements that invite the actual reader to respond to the text in certain ways'.³² This reader is a textual construct who responds perfectly to every interpretative suggestion that the implied author (the textual counterpart of the implied reader) makes in the work. The implied reader adopts completely the assumptions and point of view of the work itself. In this part of the analysis, the meaning of the narrative will be elucidated by following the clues placed in the text by the author. These clues are 'perfectly' read by the implied reader and at the same time shape the creation of the implied reader in the narrative.³³ This analysis will be undertaken on the seventeen occurrences of *σημείον* in the text, and also with respect to the sign narratives. It must be admitted at once that the figure of the implied reader is an interpretational conceit. The reading offered under the guise of the implied reader is the provisional attempt of the 'real reader' who is writing these words at this point in time. This 'real reader' may well have missed many things or have 'over-read' as well, and is on the way to becoming the implied reader as with successive readings he too is being trained by the text to become its implied reader. Nonetheless, from the point of view of literary analysis, the figure of implied reader remains a useful construct.

The second direction of inquiry moves inwards from the reader to the text. Here the attempt is made to try and understand the persuasive impact of the Johannine presentation by asking what might the early audience bring to the

²⁹ This is the pithy summary of Moore (1989: *xxi*), though he would doubtless critique the conservative work done here in the name of both.

³⁰ I am indebted to Bolt (1997: 1–2) for this procedure.

³¹ In a sense this means the author, though in narrative terms it is the control of the implied author, through a narrator, that is being examined. The terms narrator and John will be used interchangeably in this thesis.

³² Van Iersel 1998: 17–18.

³³ Eco (1981: 7–8) speaks of a text presupposing a model of competence in the reader and working in the text to build that reader's competence.

text from their cultural background or repertoire as they hear the Gospel.³⁴ It is anticipated that the examination of the use of σημεῖον in the broader context of a variety of relevant ancient literary sources will help to see more clearly the reasons for the choice of the term as a centrepiece of the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus, in the light of its potential early reception. Also, this investigation will elucidate further the impact that the selected sign narratives make within the persuasive purposes of the Gospel. By tapping into the broader cultural context of the early audience of the Gospel, the wider connotations of the material situations and occurrences presented in the sign narratives become clearer. This enables a better appreciation of their impact within the rhetorical purposes of the Gospel.

The convergence of these two directions of inquiry enables a more comprehensive description to be given of the function of the sign language and narratives in the Fourth Gospel. Such a description encompasses the function of the language and narratives within the Gospel's rhetorical strategy as well as an appreciation of the possible emotional impact of this language and especially the sign narratives. The sign narratives are occasionally regarded as simply providing a lead into the extended discourses that follow. This is based on the assumption that the 'word' is really where all the action of the Gospel takes place. While not denying the relationship that exists between sign and discourse in the Gospel, it is suggested that a little more time should be taken to pause and consider the effect and impact that the actual events recorded as signs might have on an audience. The events themselves, the dilemmas recorded, and their solutions also contribute to the portrait of Christ presented in the Gospel. They are more than just a lead into the discourse material.³⁵

1.2.1 Three Issues

In terms of the investigation to follow, three issues need to be commented upon at greater length. The first concerns the relationship between what might be called the background and the foreground of the Gospel. The second concerns the legitimacy of an approach that attempts to bring into relationship

³⁴ The term repertoire is used by Bolt (2001: 5 n. 13) to refer to 'the prior understandings that already exist in the reader's mind before he or she reads a narrative'. Hawthorn (2000: 301) defines cultural repertoire a little more expansively as 'those cultural traits, objects, and practices to which a reader has expressive or participatory access'. Van Iersel (1998: 23–24) speaks of language, literary conventions, shared presuppositions, worldview, fund of general knowledge, and comparable experiences and ideas.

³⁵ Just (1997: 7) observes, with respect to studies on the healing of the blind in the Gospels, that 'since the focus of these studies is often on the "miraculous" activity of Jesus and the implications of his actions for such theological concerns as Christology or eschatology, the blind characters themselves quickly fade from view and little attention is paid to them as individuals'.

the implied reader and the early audience of the Gospel. The third concerns the composition of the Gospel's early audience.

1.2.1.1 Background and Foreground

There is a great deal of potential confusion that arises when discussing the difference, and also relationship, between the conceptual background of a work and its audience, the world behind the text and the world in front of the text.³⁶ Research on the Fourth Gospel has seen a considerable shift in focus concerning the sources of John's thought. In the early part of this century the search was conducted for the conceptual background of the Gospel mainly in the Hellenistic world until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Since then the pendulum has swung markedly to seeing the conceptual background of the Fourth Gospel located within the world of Judaism. This is in fact the Gospel's own testimony (4.22). The question of conceptual background is different, though, to the question of audience and the world in front of the text. The repertoire of the audience in front of the text ought to be differentiated more clearly, as far as this might be possible, from the conceptual background of the text. It is not suggested that there is no relationship between the two, but that it is a matter of emphasis and orientation. It is a question of conceptual origins and communication strategy. The same story or concept may be communicated to different communities and groups in different ways and in fact may need to be in order to communicate it effectively.³⁷ Moloney's comments on this matter are appropriate,

The Gospel of John told the old story of Jesus in a radically different fashion without betraying the roots of the original Christian tradition: the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. One of the reasons for these remarkable differences, might I suggest, was an awareness of the new world into which Jesus' story had to be announced...The Gospel of John builds bridges from one socio-cultural and religious world... into another... and in doing so serves as a paradigm for all who seek to tell and re-tell the story of Jesus.³⁸

There is little doubt that the audience to whom the particular piece of communication is addressed will colour and shape the presentation but this is different to saying that the origins of the conceptual content of the communication are to be found there as well. The difference may be fine but it is real. Such a distinction acknowledges that a skilled communicator is in command of her material and couches it in terms that accurately communicate

³⁶ The terms can be found in Moloney (1998: 13).

³⁷ G. Ebeling (1971: 265) suggests that 'in some cases the same word can be said to another time only by being said differently'.

³⁸ Moloney 2002: 649.

across a cultural or conceptual divide without the essential message being necessarily contaminated in the process. All of this is to say that the nature of the audience may go some way to accounting for the form and emphasis of a work but not necessarily the conceptual content and origins of the material. The reader is important but so is the author. Authors are important but so also will be an examination of the social context, as far as it can be established, of the situation into which their writing is released. Both examining how an author communicates and asking what might be heard in this communication by a real flesh-and-blood audience are relevant and complementary perspectives for investigation.

1.2.1.2 Implied Reader and Authorial Audience

Literary studies focus on the final form of the text and use the figure of the implied reader in their analysis. The implied reader is normally seen to be a purely textual construct and therefore not to be confused with any real reader, past or present.³⁹ There are three good reasons, however, for attempting to broach the relationship of this textual construct to the world of the early, or authorial, audience of the Gospel.⁴⁰

First, from a historical perspective, there is a relationship between the authorial audience and the implied reader. The point is that while the implied reader may very well be a textual construct, it remains the creation of a real author communicating via a specific language at a specific place and time. Unavoidably features from this wider context will influence the portrait of the implied reader and make the move to examine the relationship between the intended audience/early readers of the text and the implied reader a necessary one for comprehension of the text. This would appear to be especially so for a work that is seeking to persuade.

Secondly, an ethical reason proceeds from this observation. The original addressees of the text have some sort of right or priority when it comes to the interpretative task. With respect to the Fourth Gospel, this is based on the 'you' (plural) address in 20.31. Motyer makes the point that here is a group, which is definable by historical investigation, to whom this text is addressed.⁴¹ A relationship is clearly established at this point between the

³⁹ Vorster (1989: 35–36) warns that the 'reader in the text' cannot be used to go directly to the 'flesh-and-blood original readers'.

⁴⁰ What follows is indebted to the discussion of Rabinowitz (1977: 121–41), Culpepper (1983: 205–227) and Moloney (1993: 9–22). Culpepper (1983: 206) defines the authorial audience as the 'real' audience for whom the author is writing, about whom certain assumptions have to be made. He suggests that most authors try and keep the distance between the real audience and the authorial audience to a minimum. Moloney's term 'the intended reader' appears to cover the same ground.

⁴¹ Motyer 1997a: 115–6.

implied reader and the intended audience.⁴² Motyer suggests further that the members of this group are the natural ‘owners’ of the text. ‘They’ have the right to describe the precise force of the arguments presented in the text that are intended to move them to a particular response.⁴³

Thirdly, from the hermeneutical perspective of later appropriation of the text, van Iersel points out the necessity of this interpretative move. He states that ‘one of the principal means of bridging or at least diminishing the distance between later readers and the text is examination of the presumed effect of the story on its original audience’.⁴⁴ While he concedes the problematic and speculative nature of this enterprise, the necessity remains. There is some justification, then, for probing the text for indications of the authorial audience and bringing these observations into relationship with the figure of the implied reader.

1.2.1.3 *The Nature of the Audience*

Finally, how broadly or narrowly ought the authorial audience of the Gospel be conceived? This is an important issue for a topic such as signs, which are ‘read’ or ‘heard’ in a cultural context and will draw their meaning and significance from their location in that context. What might be the reasonably expected components of the cultural repertoire of the early audience of the Gospel? This will depend upon how the early audience is conceived.

The authorial audience of the Fourth Gospel can be conceived of in quite broad terms. This breadth is posited in terms of both ethnic makeup and Christian experience and would apply whether one adheres to a view that sees the Gospel written for a narrowly conceived Christian community or the more expansive view of recent critics of Gospel community hypotheses.⁴⁵ This is suggested on the basis of the likely provenance of the Gospel and hints within the narrative of the Gospel itself. It is also in line with the observation that exegetes appear increasingly more prepared to acknowledge the possibility of diversity in John’s audience.⁴⁶

When it comes to the provenance of the Gospel, most scholars are hesitant about being too dogmatic. Ephesus is the traditional favourite, though usually tentatively supported. The other two principal candidates are Alexandria and

⁴² Cf. Moloney (1993: 20), ‘The intended reader both *is* and *is not* the implied reader’. There is also a sense in which the generality of this address creates a relationship with all subsequent (real) readers but this does not deny the original circumstance of address.

⁴³ Motyer 1997a: 116; cf. Motyer 1997b.

⁴⁴ Van Iersel 1998: 24.

⁴⁵ For the more expansive view see Bauckham (1998b). The most extensive critique of his position, and therefore restatement of the Gospel communities hypothesis, is by Sim (2001).

⁴⁶ C.R.Koester (1996), Moloney (2002: 35, esp. n.69) and Edwards (2003: 45) are amongst those who have recently commented to this effect.

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