The Gospel of John: communicative processes in a narrative text

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ABSTRACT
This paper develops an analytical program of an imaginary commentary on John. It reflects and reacts on existing johannine studies and proposes new ways of research. Based on the most simple and fundamental starting-points it distinguishes three communicative devices of narratives: the communication on the level of the told story; the indirect communication between a narrator and hearers and a form of direct communication between a narrator and hearers. It connects these devices with programmatical remarks on johannine narrative (the joy of reading), ideology (the usefulness of the text) and interests (whose interests are served in what way.

Let me begin with a few simple observations. A story is a complex reality which discloses its secrets only reluctantly. In the following analyses I start from the supposition that stories are embedded in the multifaceted structure of human communication. People want to relate something and other people are willing to listen. Sometimes this happens with difficulty and even aversion, sometimes with real interest or even with passion. But it always takes place in contradiction because there are conflicting interests. In this essay I want to comment on this complex reality as a contribution within the field of exegesis from the perspective of literary science. In doing so I shall deepen and explicitate existing starting-points.

John's gospel is the factual point of reference. This gospel is in a way the "cinderella" among the narrative texts of the New Testament. As a story it does not get high marks: not because of its separate narratives (the healing of the man born blind, the resurrection of Lazarus, the process by Pilate) but because of the story in its totality, because of the extension and the quantity of the Jesus-sayings in the whole of the story and because of the abundance of theological reasoning and impact. An author like Bultmann reorganised John's text completely on the basis of his own literary presuppositions. Dodd maintained that the narrator, gradually learning his trade, only managed to find the right balance between narrative and discursive realities from chapter 9 onwards. But even Schnackenburg could still interchange chapter 5 and 6 and be seemingly unconcerned about the narrative effects, while an author like Brown (1966-1970) compares John with the Synoptics in order to
reconstruct the origin of the text: an interest in the history of the text and of John's community to which he has remained faithful in his later works. There are, however, also interpretations which consider the text more seriously from the narrative point of view: Kysar (1984) is such a (very careful) attempt; Culpepper (1983) is more flamboyant, but a lot of work remains to be done.

I want, in this article, to determine a number of starting-points which are all related to the basic point of departure that a narrative text seeks to communicate with readers. The writer wants to tell something and does this by way of a story. The reader/hearer is willing to listen by taking in the message as told. It is a structured process which we can study in its separate elements.

1 THE BASIC SENTENCES
It may be useful to start from the very beginning with the basic structure of communication:

I-sender --- message --- you-receiver

and with the very first basic sentence:

1a You must listen well

I-sender --> [listen well] --> you-receiver

A number of things complicate this very simple sentence:

* In contradistinction to the you-position which is explicitated ("you must listen well"), the I-position remains implicit. There is no misunderstanding because an "I" says the sentence, but there is a difference in communicative explicitness.
* That means that an implicit message is being sent together with the explicit message because the sentence is spoken. The immediate and direct communication is surrounded by meta-communication: the "I" has the right to speak in this way, or better, the spoken sentence implies that the I-speaker has that right. This meta-communication becomes most clear when we vary the sentence:
1b Would you be so kind as to listen
1c Would you listen, damn you
1d May I please: now you should really listen to me, and so forth.

* Communication in meta-communication wants to show that the message of the sentence (of a story) is embedded in a factual linguistic event. The content of the sentence and the communication of this content are two separate and to be separated realities.
To arrive at the communicative structure of story-telling the transition must be made (linguistically) from this first basic sentence to the telling of this speech act. One must make the transition from the actuality of the concrete speech act to the actuality of the relating of the speech act. In principle there are three possibilities:

1.1 *I said that they should listen well*

This simple repetition complicates the communicative situation in the plural. It is a sentence which within a speech act (an "I" who is speaking to others) talks about a speech act (an "I" who has said something to others):

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I. --> I ----> listen well ----> they receivers ---> you hearers
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and where the meta-communication is doubled: the I-sender has the right to tell the you-receivers that they must listen, a right which is confirmed by the actual narration of the I-narrator for others (you-hearers).

Of prime importance now is that in narrating something, a distinction is made in the act of narrating between the level relating to the told story and the level relating to the narrating: this means a distinction between the communication which plays between the persons of the told story, and the communication between the narrator and the hearers.

1.2 In sentence 1e these two levels hardly interfere with each other. They are (more or less) separated and because no particulars are told about the actual narrating situation the distinction is not very important in this kind of sentence. That is quite different, if we vary the sentence to:

If *I said: you must listen well*

The communicative structure runs parallel to that in 1e per se:

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I. --> I ----> listen well ----> they receivers ---> you hearers
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but there is also a clear difference. In the communicated message the "you"-position has been kept. To whom is "I" telling his story (his sentence)? He speaks about a you in the past tense and about another place, but the question is: are the actual you to whom he tells his story completely outside his scope? It is not very clear how far the interference goes, because the actual narrative situation is not really explicitated; but however implicitly it is done, on the level of the narration of the story it is communicated that the actual hearers need to listen well, because otherwise... and so forth.

The conclusion is clear. In every story there is in principle a double communication system. On the level of the told story the communication between
the characters of the story is imbedded by the communication between a narrator and a hearer on the level of the narration of the story.

1.3 That is not all. Linguistically - and communicatively - it is possible to explicitate the indirect communication between the narrator and the hearers. The base sentence can be changed, without changing the object, into:

1g because listening is the beginning of wisdom I said that they should listen well.
The basic structure is amplified by a comment-sentence of the narrator which enters into the process of communication:

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\text{narrator} \rightarrow \text{I listen} \rightarrow \text{they} \rightarrow \text{you hearers}
\]

It is an attempt to explicitate the indirect meta-communication. The narrator of the story takes the view that there is a common point of departure between him/her and the people to whom he/she speaks. The narrated event is amplified by - in this case - a comment-sentence which is supposed to clarify why what is told, happened. Not every narrator feels the same need to explain things this way. John is a fervent believer in it and it gives his text a singular character.

I believe that we can speak here of "direct communication", notwithstanding the fact that in this kind of sentences the meta-communicative structure has not been cancelled: the narrator creates his hearers even more explicitly because communication itself is at stake. This insight plays a role already with the classical communication theorists, Watzlawick and Bradford, in the mid sixties, during the high period of the feedback experiments. However much one tries to bring communication on the level of meta-communication, one can never completely escape it.

2 THE COMMUNICATION OF THE CHARACTERS OF THE STORY ON THE LEVEL OF THE TOLD STORY

These base sentences determine the communicative structure of every story, obviously not as separate realities but as interdependent processes which, in their connection, determine the communicative effect of a story. It is in this way that I interpret Bakthin: the one voice of the narrator who speaks a poly-dialogical language; the one light which breaks up in many colours through the prism.

We have to start with the story as told because that is the invitation of the narrator to his listeners: to be in contact with them. A story is told and the listeners are asked to enter into the narrative world. The unexpected and the
new play a role. It is the level of the *frui*, of enjoying the confrontation with another world in which unknown but yet-known characters play a role.

I do not mean that only pleasure determines the reading or listening. A story can shock, it can be boring or confusing but one will return to it, if there are elements of surprise: the typical structure, the dramatic progress, the particular placing of the characters in time and place, the subtle modalities in their interplay of the possible and the impossible, of necessity and fate, of probability and improbability. Communication will continue only on the basis of "new information".

The "joy of reading" of which Barthes was the great promotor as reaction against the many, tiring analyses of his time (he knew quite well what he was fighting) could again be taken up also in the exegesis of John’s gospel: the meaning of the text as a told story, seen as a writer's experiment to introduce the reader into a world he does not know. I obviously cannot give all the details in this article. But without giving in to the desire to be exhaustive I would like to say the following:

* There is a real need in exegesis to call attention to the "exotic" value of the told story. Professional exegesis of the New Testament suffers from its own history, the recent rationalistic past where miracle stories, prophesies, magic practices and so forth need "to be explained" for one's own readers: or they are explained out of existence: "nothing extraordinary happened", or the individual stories "are dated" in the literature of classical antiquity: "miracles stories are in that time a normal thing and therefore that must be true also for the New Testament". That is all one reads in exegesis today. The most absurd stories, metaphors and presentations are discussed as if they are matter of fact reality. And if one hears a sense of wonder as for example in Käsemann's study *Jesu letzter Wille nach Johannes*, it seems to be only to give greater authority to an historical reconstruction.

If we look at John’s gospel from the point of view of communication of the modern reader this is not so self-evident at all. Considering the need of the reader to fit what he/she reads into what passes before one’s eyes on a daily basis, one will see more discrepancies than correspondence to begin with: a main character who knows far more than what is humanly possible on the basis of absolute unassailability; who has access to heavenly secrets and speaks about them; who is capable of performing miracles which are beyond all comprehension: changing water into wine; healing a blind man and a cripple; giving food to a large crowd of people; calling forth a dead man from his tomb; a character who acts forcefully and yet in the end does not do much more than talking; who has an enormous self-consciousness and who yet often speaks about himself in the third person. The Jesus figure in John is also for people who have some knowledge of the classics, a character beyond compare.
For the modern reader there are, however, also some points of correspondence, but they are to be found more in certain absurd and expressionistic forms of literature, related to lyrical forms of poetry than in biographies or historical literature.

* Looking from another point of view there is the urgent need in exegesis to look anew at the dramatic structure of the total story. I cannot say that no thought has been given to this, but I question whether modern thinking on narratology has been applied well enough. John is not an interesting story in the sense that its dénouement is deferred till the last page of his book (but then, where does one find that nowadays?), but John does have an exciting structure. What happens to the story, if we do not start from a dual division (ch 1-12 as part 1 and ch 13-20[2]) as part 2) which is narratively fatal and unsatisfactory, but if we read the total text as one story?

The most important realities are then no longer the content of the individual parts - the books of signs and the book of glory or variations on that - but the narrative cadre - the happy opening, the crisis, the secret meal, the judicial process, the contract beyond death - which keeps beginning and end together as expression of the questions about the why and from where and to which. What happens to the text, if we look at John seriously as a cyclical thinker who, although he repeatedly returns to what has been said previously, nevertheless develops the story progressively? What is the meaning of the fact that readers are time and again surprised by new, narratively unprepared realities: the judicial examination of John the Baptist, the invitation to Cana, Jesus' first appearance in the temple, the position of the twelve in chapter 6, the enormous conflict with the Jews in chapter 8, the friendship with Lazarus, Mary and Martha, the narrative extensiveness of the meal, the care of Mary Magdalene. Where else in world literature do you find a text which begins with a poem, a poem furthermore which is prologue as well as summary and epilogue? All these many questions and more are possible. They call for answers which are literarily oriented, because they are in the focus of the communication between narrator and reader. It almost seems as if we have only just begun to read John and as if the real insight in structure and meaning is still to come.

* A very important question in this cluster is whether it is possible to show that the many sentences spoken by the main character are taken up in the dramatic structure of the total story. There is a good deal of confusion about this discursive aspect of John's gospel. Some exegetes speak about "addresses" by Jesus, when they are in fact no more than discussions. Concrete sayings are treated as if they are unconnected sentences. Monologues are excised from the context and described as unrelated treatises. Connections in the text are not respected, references are omitted. The author's own indications of dialogue are replaced by new self-invented divisions based on content. All these reactions are,
apparently, called forth by the text; they all consider the concrete indications by the author as irrelevant.

I attach a good deal of value to these concrete indications, because, if ever in a told story communication is intended, it will be preferably indicated in the discourse, that is in all those places in the text where people are in mutual discourse. And in John this often happens. No other evangelist lets the main character speak as much as John does. Probably the same can be said about Jesus’ antagonists, who in John’s gospel are not so varied in number as in the Synoptics. But they show an even greater variety of communicative colour. John’s text is a dialogue text which has its own construction and dramatic discursive structure. The reader is slowly introduced to the complicated and esoteric mythology which may be fairly well coherent in content - I will come back to that -, but which is really quite disparate in time and place and communicative power.

* We must realise that John’s gospel is a story of conflict: the confrontation of the heavenly reality with its cosmic counter-forces, personified by Jesus who comes from God as son-emissary and by the Jews who are unwilling or incapable of recognising anything of a divine origin. Recent exegetical attempts tried to explicitate the polemical character of the text more clearly. Such attempts run parallel to an exegesis which looks at the text as a communicative reality. The story which is told is itself a real effort to grasp the conflict: to unravel truth from falsehood, to combine fate and necessity, to situate the possible within the impossible, that is it is connected with the conflicting reality of everybody who searches in the chaos of "les mots et les choses" (Foucault) for meaning and will definitely not find it. "A short time and you will not see me anymore". The text calls forth so much resistance, because it seems that the author has seen the light. That may be one aspect of the truth, but in the text Jesus alone has this position of truth. All others are on the dark road of trial and error.

3 THE INDIRECT COMMUNICATION BETWEEN NARRATOR AND HEARERS

As I mentioned above the told story is not the only communicative process in the text. By way of discursive sentences the author can build in interferences which assure that the voice of the narrator communicates more directly with the listeners to the story. That is not yet a "direct" communication, because the narrator borrows the voices of his/her characters.

It can happen in a variety of ways:

* When in a direct communication between "I-you" the transition is made to a third person: "if someone..."; "everyone who..."; "whoever...";
* Or when a "we-you" position is taken which goes beyond the expressed communication between the characters;
* When the world, time and place referred to are not limited within the communication between the characters of the story, but are presented as an actuality in the communication between the narrator and his listeners;

* When the modalities of the communication result in approval or disapproval authenticated by the author.

This quasi-factual listing of ways to localize the "voice" of the narrator should not give the impression that the totality of the text is not involved. The special places which need to be determined in precise studies, are like fish hooks which pull the complete fish out of the water.

What becomes visible is the ideological aspect of the text: all the presentations, developed and not fully developed ideas, metaphors and imagery which, in interconnection, express the author's vision of man and society: the whole "sophia" about God, man, language and world. This is the level of the uti, the use and usefulness of a text in confrontation with the endless series of thoughts and images which fill man's life from birth to death.

An author like Althusser, who in central places in his opus speaks about ideology and its use, can fruitfully be used precisely on this level of the text. An ideology is never a pure thought structure. It takes its place in the lives of concrete people and influences them via institutions and practices and rites. The ideology in societies is not simple, because no society is simple as long as the interest of people is not taken up in a simple social goal - and capitalistic societies which are organised along the distinctive line of haves and have-nots show a multiplicity of conflicting interests. Ideology connects with concrete interests of groups which are organised in various institutions and which manifest themselves in other rites and practices.

Again we see the conflict situation as the determining element in communication. In John's gospel it is the base-sentence "we believe what you do not know": an ideology formulated from conflict which within the conflict takes a stand and which works its way towards a conflictual reception. Followers of Jesus, who are in conflict with "the unbelief" of the Jews and who make the narrator of the story their spokesman - until within the group new conflicts arise with followers of Jesus who do not want anything to do with flesh and blood - regroup themselves around a profession of faith in Jesus which conflicts with the powers of the cosmos: the God-Emperor over against the Lord and God who is Jesus.

John's ideology is "in communication" with the hearers of the text from the starting-point of these areas of conflict, also with hearers who live in a time and place different from the one presupposed in the text. They must find out how they can make the meaning of the text fruitful in their own ideologically determined existence. In principle there are two ways: the ideological as a language event which points inward, in which meanings are built through interconnecting connotations; and the ideological as a language event which points outward, in which meanings are built through the denota-
tive functions of language: connotations and denotation as the fundamental structures of every language expression.

All the talking about the ideology of John's gospel may never lead us to forget that it is imbedded in the totality of the text and that it is verbalised only in bits and pieces. The text runs from pronouncement to pronouncement and, in the connotative as well as in the denotative aspect, we need to begin afresh with analyses which promise to be filled with the joy of discovery. Again, I cannot be exhaustive but some observations seem pertinent:

* The question whether John's textual construction has a specific structure also with regard to the area of ideology must be approached completely from scratch. Bultmann's interpretation may have brought us too much to think that each partial story in John has the same message and that the narrative sequence is of minor importance precisely under this aspect. However, a posteriori it seems to me that Bultmann's point of departure is not really correct, if we see that a new problem is touched upon in practically every chapter: the series of Jewish titles in chapter 1; the discussion about origins in chapter 3; the new unity of Jews and Samaritans in chapter 4; the christology of the son and messenger in chapter 5; the exodus and desert trek in chapter 6; the christology of the Feast of tabernacles in chapters 7 and 8; the struggle for leadership in chapters 9 and 10 and so on. As far as I know little study has been done on this intricated combination of ideology and narratology.

* John is and remains an intriguing author. Reconstructing his ideology is a challenge to every reader, not only because of its complex reality - few people will deny that - but also simply because of the ambiguities in the text. Culpepper's study clarified for me that we need to start on an even more elementary level in this reconstruction, with questions like: when can one take an author's word for something? When is the author speaking ironically and when certainly not? How do his metaphors - on bread, light, water, vine, shepherd - function in the totality of his ideology and so forth.

So often we find sentences which say more than what is written; so often things are not mentioned; even though secret after secret is manifested the narrator lets his listeners guess: did the hour of Jesus come or not at Cana? Is Nicodemus a good teacher or a bad one? Are the five husbands of the Samaritan woman "all she has done"? What kind of faith does the beloved disciple reach when he finds the tomb empty? We simply still lack the insight in the narrative and discursive connotations of John's language to be able to say anything definite about "die Mythologie des Johannesevangeliums".

* For the rest, the same can be said about the denotative aspects of the ideology. In a way this has been treated even worse in exegesis. John is after all a spiritual writer who speaks about heavenly realities, a gnostic or anti-gnostic author who is not interested in concrete, earthly realities.
The studies of the last ten years which gave attention to the polemical character of the text did change this image, but a lot of work still needs to be done before this is concretised for the function of John's ideology itself: the connection of his ideology and the institutions (Old Testament, Jewry, Pharisees, High Priests, disciples, the faithful ones) and the concrete practices and rites as the doctrinal discussions, the common meals, baptism and the experience of the spirit as well as the self-image of the Jesus-group; the connection between the conflict of the followers of Jesus and the Jews who did not believe in Him with the conflict between the Jesus-group and the powers of this world; but also the social bedding of the gospel in Hellenistic society; the position of women and the relationship between men and women; the structure of the Jesus-group: Peter's position and that of the beloved disciple; the denotative analysis of John's metaphors. It is still quite a program to be worked on.

4 THE DIRECT COMMUNICATION BETWEEN NARRATOR AND HEARERS ON THE LEVEL OF THE NARRATION OF THE STORY

The indirect way in which a narrator can communicate with his listeners is often not enough for narrators. They get hold of the communication-system more directly via comment-like sentences as passageways to possible listeners, a common ground where narrator and listener agree to enter the strange world of the text. This reality is an important narrative phenomenon which John uses often. His text is criss-crossed with asides as indications for possible readers.

We look at the text as told story again, but now from the perspective of the relation between the implicit author and the implicit reader. The asides "create" the readers. Seen from the author these asides are indications added to the text to bring the reader to the level of the told story. Seen from the readers they are access-words to enter the story at the level of the told story. From the viewpoint of communication itself it is a feedback system in which the communication is explicitated. It should be clear that this does not suspend the meta-communication. That is impossible in oral communication and much more so in written communication. We have to be content with first steps which indicate direction of interest for the author in this concrete text. This is the level of inter-esse, the cui bono of Bloch's Prinzip der Hoffnung: whose interests are served in what way in this text?

We can distinguish at least five functions:

* information: the readers get to know things which the characters of the story do not know but which are important for the told story.
* explicitation: there is an explanation for the readers how to understand certain words, practices, attitudes and so forth. This is additional information.
* commentary: it is explained to the readers what the connection is between cause and effect of the events as told.
* interpretation: the readers are told how they should fit the events, happenings and communication processes into a value system.
* evaluation: the readers are confronted with the norm system of the author.

Because John uses this linguistic-narrative possibility quite a lot, exegesis has given it a fair amount of attention but, seldom or never, from a framework of interpretation which respects its narrative functions and aspects. Van Belle’s monography *Les parenthèses dans l’Évangile de Jean* seemingly assumes that it is better to discuss these asides without any reference to any literary theory. This seems to me to be rather absurd, unless one reduces exegesis to a simple enumeration of various author’s opinions. If there is one textual phenomenon which is literary-narratively determined, it is this system of asides which has no meaning at all outside of a co-text. There is absolutely nothing outside the symbiose with a text.

Research, therefore, needs to be done on the ways along which John "creates" his readers in his text. I believe that a consistent acceptance of this narrative reality can solve a difficult problem in Johannine research. It can answer the question why the text as a whole is so anti-Jewish, notwithstanding the fact that the told story as well as the argumentative force of the used ideology are intensely Jewish oriented. While the whole story is situated in Israel and introduces the hearers in places, customs and practices which are explicitly Jewish; while all sorts of arguments can only be understood, if one possesses a good knowledge of Jewish theology and philosophy, yet the tendency and the meaning of the story is anti-Jewish: the Jews are seen as the representatives of the anti-divine forces in the cosmos. One can only understand this if one accepts that the communication with "the Jews" has been broken: and that is precisely what happens in the asides.

The asides bring forward the implicit reader as I previously said. One can use them indirectly to get a better understanding of the intended readership of the author. One realises, then, that very consistently all Jewish names and customs are explained; that Jewish feasts are presented as Jewish; that Jewish practices like circumcision, the laws of purification and the sabbath are rejected; that the controversy between Jews and Christians about Jesus's titles "Messiah and Son of God" leads to hatred and "fear of the Jews"; that this hatred will bring about the expulsion from the synagogue and even to incidental attempts at murder. One can hardly deny that with his text John wants to create readers who do not have contact with Jews / who no longer have contact / who are not Jews any more / who are no Jews. Thus, as a last possibility, it could even be that John wrote for non-Jews.

It should be clear, anyway, that the whole communicative system of the asides needs to be taken up when we read the text. In a certain sense all remarks which I made regarding the systems of communication are again important: the connection with the dramatic build-up of the text; the distinction between the denotative and the connotative functions; the way to fit it in
the areas of conflict. Till the very last fibres of his text John remains an author who completely puts himself at risks.

In closing I only would like to remark how the author has added a second story in his asides, a story which in miniature reflects the main story: followers of Jesus in conflict with the societal powers that be; who are afraid because they might get the worst of it; who have received Jesus’ life as a support and model - because the disciples will imitate those same actions through which Jesus won victory over the world. A story within a story: a serpent biting in its own tail. Beginning and end are connected. John wants his readers, the readers of his text, to return to his story again and again.

WORKS CONSULTED


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