Repetitions and variations—
experiencing the power of the Gospel of
John as literary symphony

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ABSTRACT
A functional reading of the fourth Gospel can be compared to listening to a well balanced musical symphony in which, by way of comparison, a rhetorical transaction with theological effects is communicated. After applying Egan’s definition of plot, it is found that the reader of John’s Gospel experiences the affective meaning in a comprehensible, emotional sequence, because of a particular sense of causality. The power of John’s narrative lies in the presentation of relationships. This forces the reader to become affectively involved. In the Johannine model of relationships affective meaning flows from the Father, through the Son and Paraclete to come to fulfilment in the relationships of the disciples.

1 INTRODUCTION: PURPOSE AND MOTIVATION
The fourth Gospel is a theological work, communicating the story of God’s commitment to this world. The interaction between the text and the reader brings to the foreground the functional dimension of a rhetorical reading. The Johannine narrative can therefore be called a rhetorical transaction with ideological and theological effects and consequences for a given reading experience (cf. Phelan 1988:138).

The purpose of this presentation is not to propose a new method of rhetorical reading of the Gospel story, but to focus on the excitement of experiencing the power and effect of reading the unified narrative like a literary symphony. By way of analogy it can be compared with a well composed musical symphony, or theme with variations, in which a particular plan or Leitmotiv plays a prominent role. To experience a literary moment means to identify with its expressive character and to become actively involved in it, instead of trying to remember its finer details. The analogy with a musical composition can help to emphasise internal effect of the literary and rhetorical ‘mechanics’ of the text, thereby facilitating the reader to produce rhetorical meaning.

In order to communicate the Jesus story to a typical indigenous African context, the exegete is forced to internalise the story so that people can relate to it. The communication of the Johannine Jesus story will only be successful if it does not disrupt the typical harmony of the ideal African society. Fur-
thermore, the correlation, whether it be actual or potential, between narratology and ethnomusicology may lead us to a common strategy of conceptualization (cf Olson 1979), because music is inextricably bound to the religious and social identity of the indigenous people of Africa (cf Omibiyyi 1973; Nketia 1975). The sociological significance of this may inspire the exegete to help particular readers to become fully part of the Jesus story through their existential experience. Although the symbolic meaning of music is almost untranslatable, the affect has its own function in the process of communication.

The issue at stake is indeed for the reader to experience the social conventions. In this regard Stibbe has emphasised the existing relationship between John’s narrative and social identity (cf 1992:50). A reader’s identity influences social structure, but is also influenced by that structure. To share in John’s symbolic universe helps the reader to recognise that the entire society now makes sense (Berger 1984:121). The narrative is a medium enabling the reader to objectify the shared knowledge of the symbolic universe with John. Like Crites has said: ‘...such stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that men behold but like dwelling-places. People live in them...they are moving forms, at once musical and narrative, which inform people’s sense of the story of which their own lives are a part’ (1971:295, in Stibbe 1992:53). The evangelist of the fourth Gospel gathered the kernel facts from his community’s traditions about the historical Jesus in order to meet the social needs of the community. He then yoked the heterogeneous social knowledge into a new temporal and causal unity which can be called a plot (Stibbe 1992:54; cf 1993:231-247; Tolmie 1995:33-62).

The modern real reader makes sense of the world in which he/she lives by associating with this overarching narrative world or symbolic universe. The experience of the narrative power of the story helps the reader to reorientate.

We can accept that a rhetorical reading works more or less on three levels (cf Wuellner 1991:113): the *literary* and *linguistic* devices which are internal to the text; the *functional* dimension in which the text is brought to life ‘as orchestra and audience do when both together make up the performance’ (Wuellner 1991:113), and lastly, the *scholarly* level which focuses on the rhetoric of rhetorical theory. It is the functional reading which begs our attention in this study. A functional rhetorical reading means experiencing the power of the narrative. It is a corporate and cultural experience in which the process of meaning is ongoing. Such a powerful experience of theological meaning has everything to do with a thorough understanding of the narrative structure and plot of the fourth Gospel. After determining the plot, the experience can be compared to listening to music.
2 THE FOURTH GOSPEL AS THEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE

The fourth Gospel has the definite intention of portraying theological commitment. The Johannine story has to be experienced as a finished and well constructed unified narrative. To discover the point of view of the implied author and to experience solidarity with a particular Christian community in the last part of the first century remains an exegetical adventure. The theological insight of this community is caught up in a narrative directed at an implied reader via an implied author and a narrator. The relevance of John's theological narrative comes to life when a relationship between the implied reader and the reading experience of the intended readers and real readers is established (cf Moloney 1993:19). The relevance is further stretched in establishing the relationship between the implied reader and the real reader (cf Iser 1978:22). The implied reader is not identical to the intended reader but represents what the author wanted the intended reader to become in order to afford maximum communication. As real readers we are entering into communion with the intended reader as well as with the implied reader. 'The intended reader both is and is not the implied reader. And the real reader both is and is not the implied reader. Also, the real reader both is and is not the intended reader. At the point of "is" the construct of "the reader" is born' (Moloney 1993:20-21; cf Staley 1988; Moore 1989; Van Tilborg 1989). This powerful engagement between reader and text, as it now stands, is explained by Fowler: 'To be a critical reader means for me: (1) to affirm the enduring power of the Bible in my culture and in my own life; (2) and yet to remain open enough to ask any question and to risk any judgment, even if it should mean repudiating' (1985:10).

The power of the fourth Gospel as unified theological communication overwhelms the reader when it is heard as a whole. That does not mean that the description of only a single structure would make it possible to determine the development of the plot (cf Giblin 1990; Ostenstadt 1991; Pryor 1992). To experience its power it is necessary to listen to the whole from its parts and the parts from the whole which has to do with a strategy of sequence (cf Du Rand 1986:152; 1992:38). The unity of the Johannine narrative lies in the unfolding of the plot according to the ideological or theological point of view (cf Du Rand 1986:160).

Although there are a variety of definitions of the plot of a narrative as such (cf Culpepper 1983; Abrams 1971; Brooks 1985; Segovia 1991; Powell 1992; Kingsburg 1992) a specific selected description of a plot will be fundamental to the rest of this contribution. In general, a plot may be defined as an outline of events (Scholes and Kellogg 1966:12); an articulation of the skeleton of the narrative (Booth 1961:126) or a causal completion which determines the sense of unity. It becomes the source of movement from the
beginning in which anything can happen, through the middle where things become probable, to the end where everything is necessary (cf Egan 1978:455). Matera describes it as an organizing principle which gives logic and meaning to disparate events (1987:240). One can say that the story is the action itself and that the plot is how the reader learns and understands the action. In other words, the Johannine story is the chronological element of the narrative and the plot is the causal or motivational element of the narrative.

Egan describes the different understandings of the user of ‘plot’ as three intersecting axes. The first and primary axis is the *particular/abstract* axis (1978:456; cf Segovia 1991:25). Towards one end of this axis, plot is used to describe an outline of the main events and towards the other end of the axis a greater degree of abstraction is noticed, with the result that plot is understood in terms of the mind that does the organizing of incidents and events. The second axis is *synchrony/diachrony.* At the synchronic end of this axis, plot is interpreted as a synthetic or structural whole in which a causal completion determines the overall sense of unity and in which all parts serve the final end (Egan 1978:457; cf Segovia 1991:26; Du Rand 1991:16). At the diachronic end of the axis plot is seen as the source of movement from beginning to middle to end. The third axis is called the *content/emotion* axis. At the content end of the axis, plot is understood as patterns of narrative which arrange and connect the events in the narrative in order for the reader to learn the story. At the emotion end of the axis, plot is understood as patterns of emotion, in which events are organised in such a way as to produce maximum emotional effect within the reader.

This third axis, described by Egan, emphasises the proposed analogy between music and literature. The sequence of events is seen in terms of its emotional effect. When we read a story, just as when we listen to music, we simultaneously attend to various kinds of meaning, like the lexical, semantic and affective meaning. Affective meaning ‘derives from following with our gut, the rhythms of emotion which resonate from the event’ (Egan 1978:459). This affective response of the reader to events is very important in story telling. It can be said that the emphasis is more on the affective meaning of an event than on the literary form of the text. Therefore, affective meaning is primarily to be found by the reader in terms of human experience and emotion, without neglecting the content of the narrative because both lie on the same axis. Egan describes the distinction as follows: ‘...the linguistic unit within which the meaning of events is determined is the story, the kind of meaning determined is affective, and the element which determines affective meaning is plot’ (1978:46). By way of application, it can be stated that the Johannine point of view and plot according to the narrative of the fourth
Gospel determines the affective meaning of the narrative which is to be powerfully experienced.

Therefore, the plot not only organises the narrative, but determines the nature of the events which compose the Johannine story. It can be accepted that the Johannine story is created with a sense of causality. The end of the story determines the beginning and middle events, but not in the sense of logical or rational causality. The events are determined by the plot in order to bring about a particular emotional response to assert a particular sense of causality. At the end of John 1 the reader already feels, in the sense of projected expectation, in what direction the story is determined to develop. Through affective meaning causality is not primarily to be sought in the text but in the readers. Egan puts it strongly: 'What works in the world, being true to logical or rational or physical causality, is secondary; what works in the human heart or gut, being true to the causality of human emotion, is primary.'

If the fourth Gospel preserves a comprehensible emotional sequence through its plot development, then the reader is gripped up to the end of the story, although the protagonist dies along the line (cf Davies 1992). This comprehensible emotional sequencing which can be interpreted as affective causality can be compared to the listening process in music. This process of understanding is also bound up with mental processes and does not only depend on the logical arrangement of language signs.

3 A NARRATED MUSICAL SYMPHONY

Broadly speaking, an exegete and musical interpreter have a similar goal: to know how the text or music is perceived and understood. The literary experience can therefore be compared with musical experience. Even music or literary psychologists may become interested because the perception and cognition of a piece of music or a literary text reflects mental structures. The coherent organisation of an artist's material to achieve meaningful communication is essential, whether it be sculptured, written or composed (cf Du Rand 1993:301).

Some comparable issues from musical theory are to be mentioned. In general, music may be divided into three types: abstract music which does not relate or refer to anything outside the music itself; program music which refers to an outside poem, story or emotion and textual music which involves a prose text sung by a vocal solo or ensemble (cf Copland 1957; Reti 1961; Winold 1966:176). By way of comparison, the Gospel narrative functions more or less on the program level, linked to the rest of the God-story according to the Bible. When we listen to such music, it is generally on three planes: the sensuous (naïve), expressive (meaningful) and sheerly musical planes, which
correlate with naïve, exegetical and theological readings of a text, such as the Gospel narrative.

We may also take notice of varieties of musical texture, such as *monophonic* (e.g. Gregorian chant), *homophonic* (melodic line and chordal accompaniment) and *polyphonic* (separate strands of melody) textures. The Gospel narrative seems sometimes to operate on a ‘monophonic’ linear basis but is dominantly homophonic particularly in the discourses of Jesus (cf e.g chapters 6, 7 and 8).

A very interesting feature in music is creation of a sense of unity by the composer returning from time to time to the opening musical material. The opening section functions as a unifying factor to bring about a coherent structure (cf Bamberger & Brofsky 1988:139). Compare for example Mozart’s Concerto for horn and orchestra, 2, K.417, the third movement, as well as Bach’s Concerto in E major for violin and orchestra, the third movement. In the Gospel narrative the narrator returns often to the issues raised in chapter one. In such a way the narrative starts with a comparable musical theme or *Leitmotiv* which may consist of a succession of notes to be varied in different metamorphoses of rhythm, melody, harmony and tone colour. Even symmetrical or developmental repetition is found in Jesus’ journeys and discussions with people about his Father. In another article, applied to the Apocalypse of John, I have argued that the *basso ostinato* (melody repeated in the bass) figures in the same way in literary texts. This is also at stake in the so called ‘spiral’ stylistic presentation of the fourth Gospel. Mozart’s A major Piano Sonata which starts with a theme to be repeated in six variations is a remarkable example. In the Gospel narrative the Father’s commitment is spelled out in different variations in which Jesus has discussions with Nicodemus (Jn 3), the Samaritan woman (Jn 4), the healed man (Jn 5) and the disciples, to name but a few. John’s narrative probably can be compared to the format of a typical musical symphony in which repetitions and variations play a particular role.

The term symphony specifically refers to ‘the principal genre of orchestral music: a large-scale, multi-movement composition in which diverse themes, moods and developmental techniques are integrated into a unified statement’ (Schindler 1980:319; cf Harrison 1981; Guetti 1980). During the classical era the format of the symphony was more or less standardised into a predictable sequence of movements, each one casted in a common formal outline. As musical composition it has several movements, related in subject but varying in form and execution. This can be compared with the gospel narrative as genre. It usually begins with a dominant part or theme into which variations are introduced (cf Tenney 1963:118; Hoffman 1994:137). The variations modulate into each other until the whole piece is
brought to a climax. This so called variety in a symphony is provided by the contrasts of tempo, mood and emotional content between the different movements. The feeling of direction is primary to a well composed symphony, although achieved in a subtle manner. The most typical symphonic pattern is one in which the first fast movement is followed by three movements which may range from slow to very fast. Emotional direction is suggested with a slow introduction, fast inner movements and a slow finale to illustrate, for example, the pattern dark-light-dark. Ulrich says that the well composed symphony will provide both unity and variety and will embody a feeling of direction, a sense of striving toward and reaching a goal (1970:133). A sense of unity is often felt because two or three of the movements are in the same key, thus: ‘Symphony in E flat’. In such a way notes are connected and shaped into expressive designs. One may refer to the well known 41 symphonies composed by Mozart or the more than 100 by Haydn and also the 9 by Beethoven. The description of such a symphony in musical terms, when compared to the fourth Gospel’s narrative, is fascinating (cf Haydn’s Symphony no 104 in D major, discussed by Bernstein 1972:259).

The fourth Gospel as narrative can really be understood in musical terms as a composition, having several movements which are related in subject, but with variations in form and execution. The affective plot of John’s narrative also has typical formal structural features: makes use of variation; starts with a dominant part one; shows a particular direction in thought development; is written in a specific Johannine ‘key’ and reaches a final climax. This causes the whole narrative to have an effect of unity. Affective meaning aims at this elusive element in the narrative that cannot be completely captured by any rigid structural analysis. But it should be remembered that this is just an analogy between a Gospel narrative and the symphonic structure as a particular comparable musical composition.

4 THE AFFECTIVE MEANING OF THE JOHANNINE PLOT

The affective meaning of the Johannine plot is to be found in the reader. The reader is determining the affective meaning of the story, through the powerful experience of this affective meaning the reader senses a particular causality in the flow of the narrative. As in a well composed symphony, the dominance of part one of John’s narrative strikes the reader. John 1 is written in the overwhelming Johannine ‘key’, emphasising that the protagonist who comes from the Father is God himself. The whole narrative moves to a final climax through variations, but with a definite direction in its thought progression. The final climax, the slaughtering of the Lamb, is already referred to in 1:29 and 36: ‘...the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’. In such a way the reader experiences a causal affective meaning.
Causality implies that the meaning of events can be determined by their results. The implication of such a perspective is to read a narrative from the end rather than from the beginning. Such a pattern of cause and result provides the narrative with an affective forward thrust. In the light of the final effect the affective meaning of the narrative is not only recognised but also powerfully experienced.

The identification of causality in John’s story is significant for plot analysis. It can be stated that John’s theological plot is teleologically determined, which means that the final climax does not occur because of preceding events but that the end constitutes the whole narrative. The protagonist’s ministry under the banner of his Father’s salvational intention progresses towards the final climax, namely the death of the Lamb. The reader stays conscious of the cosmic struggle between light and darkness which is theologically worked out in the narrative. The light is symbolically operating as the Logos, the Son, who defeats the darkness through his death.

The Johannine plot determines a theological story about God, although it may seem that Jesus is the most prominent figure in the story itself. Therefore, the Johannine plot can be described as follows: God’s revelatory and salvational commitment to this world to be accepted or rejected. The focus falls on God’s commitment or outreach through Jesus, the Paraclete and the disciples (followers). The affective meaning of his outreach is experienced in the unfolding of the plot through the presentation of relationships. The reader experiences the powerful direction of the narrative, like in a symphony with a particular ‘basso ostinato’ or ‘passacaglia’ through the emphasis on the functional salvation of God’s commitment. The goal is not only for the reader to take notice of Jesus’ identity or his ministry, but to be confronted with a decision for salvation. The unfolding of the plot lies in the narrating of relationships of which chapter one forms the dominant departure.

The following relationships reflecting commitment in chapter one are developed in the further chapters of John’s narrative, and illustrate this point of view:

- Father and world: verses 13, 17, 18
- Father and Son: verses 1, 32 33, 34, 49, 51
- Son and world: verses 3, 9, 11, 12, 14
- Son and people: verses 4, 5
- Father and John the Baptist: verses 6, 23
- John the Baptist and people: verse 7
- Jesus and John the Baptist: verses 8, 15, 26, 27, 29, 30, 36
- John the Baptist and the Jews: verses 19, 22
- Jesus and Israel: verses 11, 31, 49
- John the Baptist and disciples: verse 35
Jesus and disciples: verses 37, 38, 42, 43, 47, 48, 50
Disciples and disciples: verses 41, 45, 46

Such a variety of relationships urges the reader to experience involvement. Every reader experiences the affective meaning of God’s commitment propagated in relationships in which he/she becomes involved by making a definite decision of acceptance or rejection of God’s commitment. The underlying response, known as belief in the Johannine idiom, means to commit oneself into a relationship. The ultimate structure forces the reader to understand that God is using relationships to convince people to make a decision for salvation. The underlying struggle between light and darkness, God and evil, is staged to bring the affective meaning of God’s commitment into relief. Like the movements in a symphony, the rest of the narrative repeats the same underlying truth through episode after episode in which the reader has to make his/her decision to God’s commitment. Throughout the narrative the reader knows the teleological direction of the story because of the final climax of God’s commitment in the protagonist’s death. The coherence and progress of the narrative lies in the powerful experience that, as a committed reader, I am to give a response to God’s commitment. Through thematic variations the representative role players in the narrative shift from event to event, while the performative affective experience carries the reader time and again back to the same plot of God’s commitment.

In the prologue, for example, Wisdom/Torah is praised as God’s agent in his commitment with creation. Despite his relationship with his own people, they rejected Him (1:11) but to those who believed in his name ‘he gave the right to become children of God’ (1:12). Whatever the origin or sources of the prologue, Christ is designated as Logos, God, who communicates in relationships with his own and with the world. The function of the Logos’ commitment is salvation (1:7). Therefore, a new relationship of ‘light’ is constituted which leads to life as the result of being part of such a relationship with God. God’s ultimate commitment through the cross is implied in the perspective of the exaltation of the Son.

John’s plot of commitment through relationships in which the reader has to respond with acceptance or rejection develops further in chapters 1-4 in the so called quest and inquiry episodes (cf Painter 1991:130). The narrative is confirming and consolidating the relationship between Jesus and the disciples: in 1:35-50 they come to Jesus and in 2:11 water is changed into wine and in 2:22 in the cleansing of the temple, they believe in him.

In the episodes concerning Nicodemus (3:1-21) and the Samaritan woman (4:4-42) the emphasis falls on the need for new relationships to meet God’s commitment. Jesus is presenting himself as the fulfilment of the human need for the ultimate relationship with God. The disciples, John the Baptist, Jesus’
mother, Nicodemus, the official, the Samaritans, the crowds, Mary and Martha, the Greeks and Mary Magdalene, to name but a few, are all confronted with God's commitment and introduced into new relationships. The protagonist's *ego eimi* sayings confirm God's agenda of real commitment. His commitment is mediated through the protagonist Jesus, but also through the Paraclete and disciples, to result in real new life. One can call the plot development a commitment for the sake of renewal, made known in the narrative through relationships. The eating and drinking of the new bread (Jn 6) and new water (Jn 4) are symbolizing the acceptance of the new relationship with God. The same can be said of the protagonist being the light of the world (Jn 8), the door and good shepherd (Jn 10) the way, truth and life (Jn 14) and the true vine (Jn 15). Although these images illustrate Jesus' Messiahship, they are narrated in the atmosphere of relationships. To accept God's commitment means to enter into a new relationship with his representative.

The farewell speeches of the protagonist (Jn 13-17) can be interpreted as the transformation of traditional Messianic views. The relationship between the new Messiah and his followers brought the Paraclete into the narrative to confirm this new relationship. And through the Paraclete, the community and readers, through association, become aware of the implications of such a new commitment with each other (the 'new command') and the world. The believers have become the representation of God's continuing committed presence in this world. This commitment, through the Paraclete and the disciples, continues to be made known through the building of new relationships into which people may enter through belief (e.g. the church). The fullness of life and the fullness of God's commitment is finally illustrated in Jesus' death and resurrection to serve as proof of God's relationship with this world through his Son, Paraclete and followers. The meaning of a true relationship with God is further confirmed by the relationship between 'brother' and 'brother' (1 John).

John's plot of God's commitment through relationships for salvational renewal is theologically determined and effectively experienced in the following categories according to the narrative:

**GOD'S COMMITMENT THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS**

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Father and Son
->
Father and cosmos (creation and people)

->
Son and cosmos (people)
->
Son and disciples (believers)
->
Paraclete and disciples (believers)

->
Disciples (believers) and disciples (believers)
->
Disciples (believers) and cosmos (people)
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The progress or direction of affective meaning in John's narrative can be illustrated in the above sketched tree of relationships. It flows from the Father, through the Son and the Paraclete to come to its fulfilment in the relationships to be built by the disciples (believers). The narratological focus of this plot is to convince the reader to orientate to true discipleship in a life giving relationship with the committed God through his Son.

WORKS CONSULTED


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